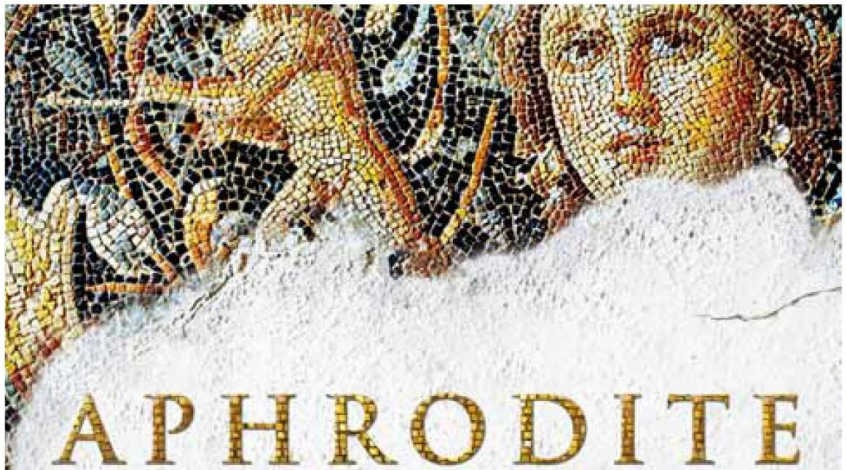




APHRODITE AND THE RABBIS

How the Jews Adapted
Roman Culture to Create
Judaism as We Know It

BURTON L. VISOTZKY



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For Asher:
a book with pictures

Greek, Roman, Hellenist, Jew

Beneath the streets of Rome, below even the subterranean layer of buildings still awaiting the kiss of the archeologist's spade, lies a silent city of the dead. Its web extends in a collection of catacombs that served as Christian and Jewish burial grounds in the late second through fourth centuries. The Christian catacombs are the more famous; they have long been open to visitors who are willing to travel a bit beyond the walls of the ancient city to the sites on the famous Appian Way. Church authorities supported the cleansing of their catacombs, removal of corpses, ventilation of the tunnels, lighting, buttressing, and other safety measures that make a trip there as tourist friendly as a visit to an underground tomb can be.

Alas, this is not the case with the Jewish catacombs, which are generally closed to the public. I visited the Jewish catacomb of Villa Torlonia by special arrangement in 2007. A fistful of euros having changed hands, I am led through the catacomb, its entrance curiously located on the grounds of a villa once inhabited by Mussolini. My tour guide for the day is the city electrician who checks monthly on the exposed wiring, left over from earlier failed attempts to improve the site. We wear miners' caps, beams of light wobbling before us. In one hand we each carry a lantern. Our other hands alternately follow the wire or gently mark a path along the porous tufa walls. The soft stone made it easy for the ancients to dig the tunnels and rooms that made

up the warren of catacombs. But it is moist to the touch and leaves the humid air with a taste of rot that does not improve my sense of otherworldly claustrophobia. Nor, to be frank, do the bones and skeletons that still lie dormant upon their shallow platform graves dug into the walls.

Furtively, I summon my courage and touch, ever so gently, the remains of the dead. I am more than startled when the bone yields to my finger, spongy rather than ossified. Deep breathing ensues on my part, but the fetid air does not exactly help matters. I finally calm myself by reading, which almost always positively affects my emotions. What am I reading in the murky confines of the catacombs? Beside nearly every body, either graffitied onto the tufa stone or mounted as a marble inscription, are the epitaphs of the departed. Not surprisingly, given that we are in Rome, the names of the Jewish dead are recorded mostly in Latin, sometimes in Greek. But unlike on the headstones we might find in Europe or even in an American Jewish cemetery, there is nary a word of Hebrew. The only way we know that we are in a Jewish catacomb is that some of the names are biblical, and the frescoes that decorate the Villa Torlonia catacombs are replete with Jewish symbols, including ubiquitous menorahs—the seven-branched candelabrum of the Jerusalem Temple destroyed in 70 CE. I read a name aloud and walk to the next set of bones, where I pause and read again. Slowly it comes to me that I am making a cemetery pilgrimage to Jews who perhaps have not had such a visit in 1,700 years. As I turn to the next skeleton with a name beside it, from some place deep in my soul burble up the words to the Jewish memorial prayer, *El Malei Rahamim*, “God full of mercy.”

“God,” I pray in Hebrew, “give proper rest to the soul of Simonides beneath the wings of your divine Presence. May he rest in the Garden of Eden. May his soul be bound up in the bundle of eternal life. And let us say, ‘Amen.’ ” I have been blessed with a pleasant baritone singing voice, so as I walk I gain confidence, offering prayers of condolence for the long, long departed. Soon I realize that the moisture on my cheeks is not just the humidity of the catacombs, but the steady welling of tears from my eyes as I mourn for those so long unvisited by loved ones. Eventually, I notice that the electrician, too, has tears in his eyes, although I am sure he does not understand a

word of Hebrew. I knew at that moment, even as I know now, that the inspiration to recite the memorial prayer would count as one of the few truly religious experiences of my life.

They say that Jews have been in the city of Rome since the century before Christianity. Even so, they took their time arriving. The Jewish Diaspora, the dispersion of the Israelite peoples from their land, took place first in the eighth century BCE (Before the Common Era, what Christians call BC) and again in 586 BCE. Both the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests sent the Israelites into exile eastward. It wasn't until the Greek era, during the fourth to third centuries BCE, that Jews migrated west and settled around the Mediterranean basin. By the time Jews came to Rome, there were Jewish communities in North Africa and Asia Minor, as well. The Five Books of Moses were translated from Hebrew into Greek by the third century BCE for the community in Alexandria, Egypt. Of course, there were Jews who much earlier had returned from exile to their ancestral homeland in what was then called Roman Palestine. Those Jews spoke Hebrew and also Aramaic (the language of their Assyrian captors of centuries earlier). But the Jews of the western exile spoke the local languages of Hellenism, which is how I came to be reading Latin and Greek grave inscriptions beneath the modern city of Rome.

As I look back years later, I still feel a connection with those who were buried in the catacombs so many centuries ago. But I do wonder about them. Would they have understood my pious gesture? Might there have been a chance—despite the absence of the language among all of the inscriptions—that they could have understood the Hebrew I intoned? Would they even have approved of the sentiment? Did Roman Jews share the outlook of the rabbis of the Land of Israel that the soul would eternally survive? It was, after all, an idea that pagan Greek philosophers shared.

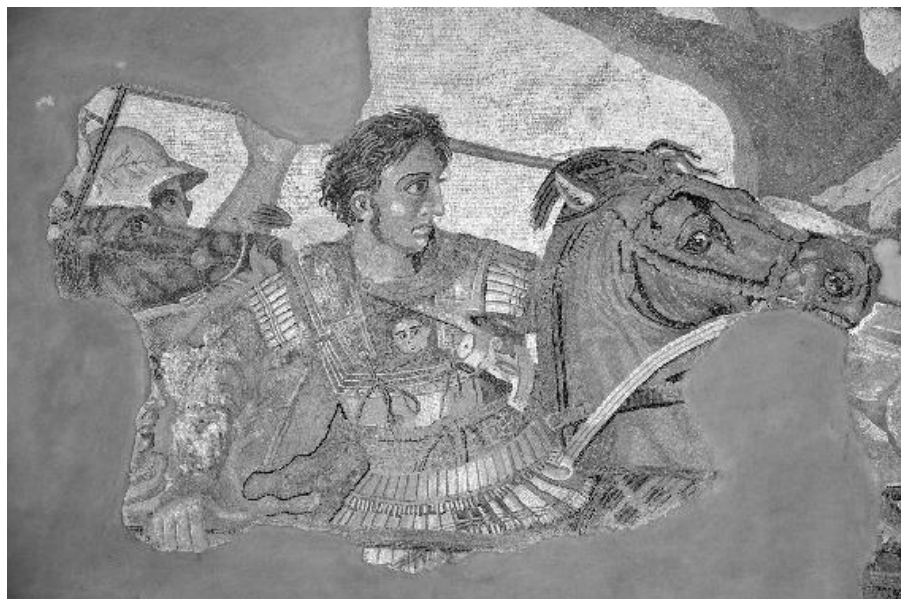
As a scholar, I know that by the time the Jews in that catacomb were buried, the Judaism of the rabbis, Judaism as we still know it today, already had begun to develop. And yet, aside from pictorial fealty to the menorah, would their Roman Judaism have been recognizable to me? And what might they have thought of my Judaism, visitor from a distant future as I was? Is then like now? Were those cosmopolitan urban Jews of Rome comparable to the Jewish

community today, say, in New York City? Can asking questions like these about them teach anything about us now? Or is this just so much naïve wishful thinking? I will return to this question a bit later, but for now, allow me to pay homage to the dead.

The Jews buried in the catacombs were Romans who spoke mostly Latin. Those whose families hailed from the Eastern Mediterranean probably spoke Greek. By culture, those Jews would be described as Greco-Roman Hellenists. That is, they were part of a millennium that started with Alexander the Great, who was born about 350 BCE, and ended at the fall of the Roman Empire, approximately 650 CE. That adds up to a thousand years of Hellenistic/Greco-Roman culture.

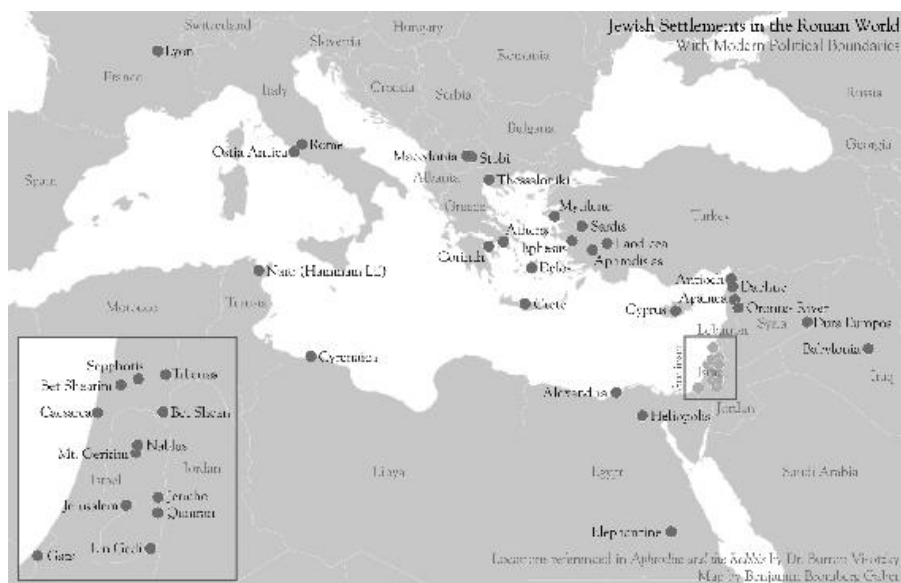
The father of Hellenism, Alexander the Great, was tutored by none less than Aristotle, the quintessential standard bearer of Greek philosophy and culture. The Greek Empire founded by Alexander ruled for only two hundred of this thousand-year reign; the Greeks were conquered by Rome in the mid-second century BCE. From that point onward Rome ruled militarily—but the majority culture nevertheless remained Hellenistic. So, we call it Greco-Roman.

The Roman Empire as a pagan enterprise persisted into the fourth century CE, when the emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and declared it a legal religion. The inhabitants of the empire soon followed his lead, and over the next hundred years, the Roman Empire became Christian. The term “pagan” refers, rather intolerantly if you ask me, to all non-monotheistic religions. Yet for all of the shifting to Christian forms of monotheism and the decline of paganism, Greco-Roman *culture* persisted. Judaism post-Temple, after 70 CE, coincides with the heyday of Roman culture, which spread as far west as what is England today and as far eastward as Armenia and the Caspian Sea. Although the Romans spoke Latin, the *lingua franca* in the west (modern Europe), Greek was very much the norm throughout the eastern empire, particularly along the Eastern Mediterranean shores, including the Land of Israel.



ALEXANDER THE GREAT MOSAIC, NAPLES NATIONAL ARCHEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

Geographically, the Land of Israel is smack-dab in the middle of the empire, although you have already seen that Judaism was not limited to the Holy Land. Chronologically, most of what I will be discussing dates from the second through the sixth and seventh centuries CE—from the middle of the Greco-Roman era until its end.



During the earlier part of the Roman period, in the years designated as BCE, what I am calling biblical or Israelite religion was focused on the Temple in Jerusalem. There, according to the dictates of Leviticus, the central book of the Torah, priests offered sacrifices to the One God. Some of these offerings were made in thanksgiving, some in atonement; almost all involved the spilling of animal blood on the Jerusalem altar. I sometimes nostalgically, sometimes mischievously, yearn for those days of yore. How satisfying it is to think that offering an animal for sacrifice could wipe clean the slate of my sins. And how interesting it would be if, instead of painfully chanting a prophetic portion in broken Hebrew, a bar mitzvah boy were called upon to prove his Jewish manhood by slaughtering an ox on the synagogue stage.

Oh well, those days are long past. In that time, before there were rabbis, the hereditary priests (*kohanim*) were the leaders of religious life, and there was a dynastic Jewish king who led political life in the Land, even as he was a vassal to the Roman emperor.

The watershed took place beginning in the year 66 CE, infamously known in Roman history as the year of the four emperors. That's right, four different men served as emperor of Rome, and as you might guess, none of the first three died of natural causes. You might also guess that the fourth, the last man standing, was the general who controlled Rome's armies. It was in this shaky political climate that Jewish zealots (that is actually the Greek term ancient historians used to describe those armed rebels) decided to rebel against Rome. War consumed the Judean province from 66 to 70, at which point the walls of Jerusalem were breached, its citizenry starved into submission, and the rebels crucified. The year 70 CE was not a good one for the Jews, although, in sorry retrospect, inevitable from the moment the rebellion broke out.

There is a genuine break in the flow of Jewish history before and after 70 CE. It took longer for Rome to end the insurrection than the empire had anticipated; its victory came not only at great cost to the Romans but with the stunning destruction of the Jewish centers that inspired the rebellion. The beautiful Herodian Temple, a wonder of the ancient world, lay in smoldering ruins. No longer would the

biblical priesthood offer sacrifices to God upon its altar. Indeed, most of the hereditary Jewish priests were killed or scattered. Jews were partially banned from the Holy City of Jerusalem, the arable land for miles around was destroyed, and the forests were denuded of the trees that were felled to feed the Roman war machine. Never again would the dictates of the biblical book of Leviticus be performed. If Judaism were to survive, something new had to arise from the remains of fallen Jerusalem.

There is a great deal of debate about what Judaism looked like in that post-Temple period of the first centuries of the Common Era, and I vacillate on whether I should even call it Judaism or, perhaps better: Judaisms. If I use the singular, I betray a bias that there was one, possibly orthodox form of Judaism that characterized Jewish practice and belief in the Roman Empire. As we will see, there were broad varieties of Judaism, both pre- and postdestruction—enough, perhaps, even to speak in the plural of Judaisms. But to do that ignores what might be a common denominator of all of the varieties of Judaism across the empire, sometimes called “common-Judaism,” which had its expression in the catacombs in the depiction of the seven-branched menorah. The menorah was a symbol by which Jews worldwide united in remembrance of, if not mourning for, the Jerusalem sanctuary.

It took quite a few more centuries for Judaism to find a singular expression as “rabbinic Judaism.” In what follows, I speak of Judaism and the Jewish practices of those fellows we call “the rabbis” as though they were one and the same thing. When I refer to Judaism, I am referring to “rabbinic Judaism.” This form of Judaism, so overwhelmingly prevalent today, did not become the normative flavor of Judaism until a mere eight hundred or so years ago. I will refer to other forms of Judaism; but the literature of the rabbis and their practices have stuck with us, and that very stickiness, along with the fact that I am a rabbi, leads me to speak of rabbinic Judaism as “Judaism” in the pages that follow, without further qualification. Reader, I lay my bias before you.

Who were those rabbis, and what was their Judaism? When the Jerusalem Temple and its priesthood came tumbling to the ground, it could not be put together again. What I have called the Israelite

religion of pre-70 CE, when those Temple and cultic institutions still existed, was replaced after 70 by other religious phenomena: what is called today Judaism. It has long been a given that Christianity arose from the Roman Empire, assimilated its culture, and became Western Civilization. In this book I will show that Judaism had a similar arc. When the Israelite Temple cult ended, it was replaced by Judaism—ultimately a religion that was shaped and defined by rabbis, who themselves were comfortable denizens of the Roman world.

Those ancient rabbis are the forebears of the modern rabbis of all varieties and denominations who still lead Jewish institutions to this very day. At the outset, the rabbis confronted the loss of the Jerusalem Temple with determination, originality, courage, and panache. In the face of the loss of the sacrificial cult and exile from Jerusalem, this small group of sages and their disciples in each generation built Judaism—a Roman religion that fit comfortably in the broader culture and so was able to survive for the ages.

The earliest leaders of the “rabbinic” Jewish community are portrayed in later texts as having come to leadership roles while the Second Temple still stood, around the turn of the millennium. Hillel the Elder, his colleague Shammai, and Gamaliel are names we associate with the beginnings of Judaism. Hillel and Shammai are not called rabbis, but each is given the title “elder.” When we refer to Hillel the Elder, it is not because there was some younger guy also named Hillel running around at the same time. “Elder” was Hillel’s title, as it was the title for Shammai and Gamaliel. In the religious community, the title “elder” persists in the church in its Greek usage: *presbyter*.

When the rabbis look back at Hillel, they note that he was originally a Babylonian. Yet the earliest generations of rabbis lived and taught in Roman Palestine. The rabbinic movement expanded eastward into Iraq, or Jewish Babylonia, only from around 220 CE. I emphasize that the Judaism of the rabbis was a product of the Land of Israel in its beginnings and was only later exported to the Diaspora. When the rabbis themselves narrate their origins, they always recall that Hillel—one of their founding fathers—was Babylonian, as though it were foreordained that rabbinic Judaism would flourish there, too. It didn’t have to be that way, especially since what became a major

center of Judaism, Babylonia, flourished under a different political empire and different culture than either the Jerusalem Temple or the earliest rabbis.

If I tell you again and again in this book that the rabbis were Greco-Roman Hellenists, I should also disclose that the rabbis of Babylonia certainly inherited aspects of Hellenism from their rabbinic forebears but lived in the Sasanian Empire, where the dominant culture was Zoroastrian. Jews are nothing if not complicated folks.

Although Hillel the Babylonian is not called *rabbi*, he is nevertheless seen as the rabbis' George Washington, as it were. Ironically, the earliest person given the actual title *rabbi* also received it anachronistically, as his story was written just after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, in 70. Looking back, the Christian Gospels refer to Jesus of Nazareth as "rabbi," going so far as to transliterate the Hebrew term into Greek letters and then define it as "teacher." In fact, the rabbis as a movement came to the fore only after 70 CE, once the priesthood had been scattered and the Jerusalem Temple burnt. The Hebrew term *rabbi* literally means "my master," and in the Hebrew Bible refers to the captain of a ship (Jonah 1:6) or other officer. In the Mishnah, the earliest compilation we have of rabbinic literature (ca. 200 CE), *rabbi* can refer to a slave owner; but most regularly it is a title for a master who teaches disciples. By the second or third century, the title *rabbi* was retrojected not only onto Jesus but even onto Moses and Elijah. The "rabbanization" of biblical figures is part of the way in which the rabbis reinforced their ideology by retelling biblical history through a decidedly rabbinic lens.

Yet for all that, from 70 CE to approximately 200 CE, the rabbis remained a fairly small group of men with no more than a dozen or so leaders in any given generation. I like to remind my own rabbinical students that on any given day there are more rabbis in-house at the Jewish Theological Seminary than there were in any given *generation* of the early centuries of rabbinic Judaism. Each *rabbi* back then had a circle of disciples, and some of these students traveled from *rabbi* to *rabbi* in order to master the oral traditions they transmitted. The traditions of the elders combined with their biblical commentaries to form what the rabbis called their "Oral Torah," which they insisted was the appropriate companion to the Written Torah, or Five Books of

Moses. While the Temple still stood, Israelite religion had been centered on the priesthood and the Jerusalem sacrificial cult. Once it was destroyed and rabbis began to emerge, they established disciple circles that mimicked those of Greek and Roman philosophers. In those philosophical schools, oral transmission of the traditions of the earlier teachers (in Greek: *paradosis*) was the common mode of teaching and learning.

The disciples' zeal for their rabbis' teaching was boundless. One rabbinic source tells of the early third-century Rabbi Kahana, who once slid beneath the bed of his teacher and eavesdropped while the teacher "conversed, and played, and met his needs" with his wife. Kahana let slip aloud this thought: "You would think that my master had never tasted this dish before!" The teacher hauled him out from under the bed and said, "Kahana! Get out of here. This is really not done!" Kahana blithely replied, "But this is Torah and I must learn." Torah, indeed.

Beyond the oral tradition, the rabbis were also deeply invested in the interpretation of Scripture. The rabbis struggled to interpret the Torah text for continued relevance. This almost obsessive rabbinic focus on the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible as the source of authority to replace the Temple was, oddly, yet another reflex of their broader Roman culture. Much as the Greeks and Romans wrote commentary and endlessly quoted from the twenty-four books of "the divine Homer," so the rabbis quoted and commented on the twenty-four books of the Hebrew Bible. That the number of books is the same is not a coincidence; it required the rabbis to do some creative accounting in order to show that the rabbinic canon and the Greco-Roman "canon" were libraries with the same number of volumes.

Despite this apparent affinity, in the first seventy years of the rabbis, beginning with the revolt against Rome in 66 CE, there were an astonishing three Jewish military clashes against the empire. The war of 66–70, and then what is called the Bar Kokhba rebellion, from 132 to 135 CE, both took place in the Land of Israel. In between there was a series of pogroms, if you will, in the Mediterranean and North Africa from 115 to 117 CE, which decimated the Jewish communities there. In every case of misguided rebellion or mismatched rioting, the outcome was clear. The only question was how much the Jews might

suffer. And yet like a phoenix rising out of the ashes, to invoke a Hellenistic simile, from the remnants surviving those three wars, rabbinic Judaism arose, a Roman religion.

In short, what is now called “Judaism” was invented in the matrix of Roman culture. Even as some rabbinic texts depicted Rome as the enemy, there is overwhelming evidence that Judaism took root in Roman soil, imbibed its nourishment, and grafted the good and pruned the bad from the Roman Empire, until a vibrant new religion—Judaism—arose from the wreckage of Israelite religion and the Temple cult, nurtured by the very empire that had destroyed it.

Like a Fish Out of Water? Stories of Judaism in Historical Context

About two decades ago I appeared at New York's 92nd Street Y on a panel about reading the Bible. My conversation partner was my friend Tom Cahill, author of the bestseller *The Gifts of the Jews*. We each spoke about Judaism as a religion of the book, how it was necessary to see the biblical canon as an anthology of Jewish religious writings, and the potential perils of using sacred Scripture as the sole source for history of the biblical period. The evening seemed to be going very well until the question-and-answer period following our presentation. The proverbial little old lady stood up and asked, "How much of the Bible is true?" Given the cautions we had just sounded, Tom answered glibly, "Fifty-six point four percent," or some such number. Imagine our astonishment as that woman took a small pad and pencil out of her pocketbook and carefully wrote down "56.4%."

Tom shot me a look that said, "Now what do we do?" I stepped up to the podium and extemporized. I explained that we needed to make a distinction between what had occurred historically and what was considered "true." Both were somewhat slippery categories. I relied on an old truism and pronounced, "History is written by the victors. It displays a bias, a point of view." But then I blithely contradicted myself by asserting that if history is a record of what happened, if it is "just one damn thing after another," then truth was something else entirely. I warmed to my theme. "The most important truths we learn

in life,” I suggested, “we often learn through reading fiction.” I was proud of that distinction and remain so.

In this book I am trying to offer some historical insight from stories that may be true but may not have happened exactly as they were told and then retold. The rabbinic texts I share here, often composed as commentaries on the Bible, are particularly difficult to read as straightforward historical accounts. It is important that we keep sight of the contexts in which these stories were told. Every tale the rabbis tell has a religious purpose and may be a well-crafted piece of didactic fiction. To offer you an analogy from Americana, I referred to George Washington in the last chapter. But do you believe he actually chopped down a cherry tree as a young man? Or was that story told to teach a lesson about the values our Founding Fathers held dear, and so to teach what we should aspire to be like as Americans? The stories we tell reveal who we are, even as they shape our own identities.

In the world of Late Antiquity, from the first through sixth centuries of the Common Era, Greek and Roman pagans told stories of the gods, stories of historical characters, stories of their political leaders and philosophers. The Jews of that period told similar stories—sometimes even the exact same stories. What these stories and many other shards of evidence teach is just how thoroughly the Jews saw themselves as Romans, even as they shaped an identity somewhat apart. The Greeks and Romans were people of the book before even the Jews were. The difference was that for Hellenists the book was Homer, while for Jews, the book was the Bible.

In the centuries following the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, once the canon of the Bible was fixed, other Jewish books and stories developed as well. I quote from these throughout this book. The Jews and Romans also shared a common stock of tales. To teach simple lessons, raconteurs both Roman and rabbinic loved to relate family-friendly fox fables. Tales of animals were apt for those wags who wished to express human dilemmas, morals, and received truths. No one could think these fox stories actually occurred as historical fact. These fables were a staple of Greek and Roman grammar schools, where the collections of Aesop and the moral lessons derived from them were studied. This well-known fox fable—

recounted by the rabbis—tells us much about Jews, Romans, and the world they shared:

A story is told about a fox that was walking by the riverside. He saw fish darting from place to place and asked them, “Why do you take flight?”

They replied, “We flee the nets that men bring to catch us.”

That wily fox said, “Why don’t you come up onto the dry ground where you and I can dwell together, just as my ancestors dwelt with your ancestors?”

They said to him, “They call you the smartest of the animals? You are an idiot. If we fear in the place where we live, how much the more so shall we fear the place of our certain death!”

This Aesop-like fable is told in the Babylonian Talmud (Berakhot 61b). It has no direct parallel in the Greek fable collections, so, lacking the traditional ending we would find in such anthologies, I ask: What is the truth taught by our fox fable? Perhaps the moral to the story is: Stay with the familiar. Your home is your safety. But if I take a step back, a different moral can suggest itself: Context is everything. Live within your context and although you may fear, you will be safe. But if you are unaware of your context, you will be like a fish out of water, assured of death.

With that moral in mind, let’s consider the fox fable in its sixth-century Talmudic context. Why was it told? Reading the broader passage from the Babylonian Talmud, we will see that the fable was offered as an analogy, placed in the mouth of a famous second-century sage who was offering a biblical commentary.

Rabbi Aqiba commented, “ ‘And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might’ (Deut. 6:5). ‘With all your soul’ means even if they take your soul.”

It was taught by the early rabbis that once upon a time

the Evil Empire decreed that Jews should not study Torah. When Pappus ben Yehudah came and found Rabbi Aqiba gathering crowds to study Torah in public, he asked, “Aqiba, are you not afraid of the empire?”

Rabbi Aqiba replied, “Let me give you an analogy: The story is told about a fox that was walking by the riverside. He saw fish darting from place to place and asked them, ‘Why do you take flight?’

“They replied, ‘We flee the nets that men bring to catch us.’

“That wily fox said, ‘Why don’t you come up onto the dry ground, where you and I can dwell together just as my ancestors dwelt with your ancestors?’

“They said to him, ‘They call you the smartest of the animals? You are an idiot. If we fear in the place where we live, how much the more so shall we fear the place of our certain death!’”

Aqiba continued, “So it is for us, too. Now we sit and study Torah, of which it is written, ‘It is your life and the length of your days’ (Deut. 30:20). If we were to cease from it, how much the more so would we forfeit our lives?”

In this context, instead of a warning to stick close to home and abide by the familiar, the fox fable becomes a call to defiance, even as it explains a verse in Deuteronomy. The fish of the fable offer the voice of an embattled minority against the dominant majority culture. Our hero Rabbi Aqiba invokes the fable to explain his resistance to Rome, even if he is fearful. For all that Aqiba’s fox fable encourages the study of Torah, when we read even further, it becomes ironically clear that Rabbi Aqiba does forfeit his life.

They say that not many days passed before Rabbi Aqiba was arrested and imprisoned. And then they arrested Pappus ben Yehuda and imprisoned him, too. Aqiba asked him, “Pappus, what brought you here?”

Pappus replied, “Blessed are you Rabbi Aqiba. At least

you were arrested for teaching Torah. Oy to me, for I, Pappus, was arrested for trivial matters.”

When they took Rabbi Aqiba to be executed it was the time of day to recite the *Shema* (Deut. 6). As they combed his flesh from his body with combs of iron, Rabbi Aqiba accepted the yoke of God’s kingdom upon him by reciting the verses of the *Shema*. His disciples asked, “Rabbi, shall you go even this far in your devotion?”

He replied, “All my life I was troubled by the meaning of this phrase, ‘with all your soul’ (Deut. 6:5). I knew it meant ‘even if they take your soul,’ and I wondered when might I have the opportunity to fulfill this commandment. Now that the opportunity is upon me, shall I not fulfill it?”

Aqiba pronounced “the Lord our God the Lord is one” (Deut. 6:4) and drew out the final word until his soul left him at “one.” A voice came from Heaven and declared, “Blessed are you Rabbi Aqiba who departed at ‘one.’ ”

The ministering angels said to God, “This is his Torah and this is his reward?!” . . . A voice came from Heaven and declared, “Blessed are you Rabbi Aqiba, for you are invited to Life Eternal in the World to Come!”

Wow! Context really *is* everything. According to the sixth-century Babylonian Talmud, Aqiba still swims in the waters of Torah, and though he might forfeit his life in this cruel world, he is granted life in the hereafter. Rome, the Evil Empire, cannot destroy his soul, even as they torture his body. Rabbi Aqiba’s martyrdom becomes exemplary for all Jews for all time. It is enshrined still today in the prayers recited on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year. Aqiba is granted the immortality of a tale we tell almost two millennia after his gruesome death.

But what happens if we look beyond the legend on the page of the Talmud? The Rabbi Aqiba martyrdom story is disconcerting for many reasons, not only to those praying on Yom Kippur, but also to the historian. Whether you focus on Jewish history or on Roman history, the facts don’t add up. Of course, the martyr’s tale has a place in

mythic memory—it moves us to tears as we recall Aqiba’s cruel death at the hand of his oppressor. It sets the stage on Yom Kippur for remorse and devotion. But still you have to ask, *sotto voce*: did it actually happen?

How likely is it that Rabbi Aqiba turned his torture session into a Torah lesson for his disciples? As our story begins, Pappus speaks with Rabbi Aqiba. Pappus is a Roman, not a Hebrew, name. I wonder if our narrator chose him as a warning against assimilation to the culture of “the Man.” Pappus contrasts Aqiba’s noble adherence to Torah study with his own trivial deeds. But Pappus vanishes from the narrative as Aqiba turns to teach his students. Aqiba’s comment, “All my life I was troubled by the meaning of this phrase,” is a commonplace in the Talmud to introduce a new interpretation of a verse or phrase of Scripture. It could easily have been put into Aqiba’s mouth by a narrator or editor who wished to offer an interpretation for the biblical text. Further, there is no other historical evidence that Rome prohibited teaching Torah in this period. Even Aqiba’s death by such cruel torture is suspect, because another rabbinic text (*The Midrash on Proverbs*, ch. 9) also tells the story of Rabbi Aqiba’s imprisonment but recounts a quiet death with no mention of such torments.

The version of the story that recounts the gruesome torture is first told in the Babylonian Talmud, compiled over four hundred years after Aqiba’s death. To make matters worse, it was compiled in Sasanian Babylonia, which was not only five hundred miles east of Roman Palestine, where Aqiba lived, but was the Roman Empire’s chief rival. Maybe there’s more to casting Rome as the Evil Empire than meets the eye? Knowing this makes me doubt the historical accuracy of our tale. Dare I suggest that the famous story of the martyrdom of Aqiba is as much a fictional fable as the one he himself tells about the fox and the fish? And the emphatic opposition between Rome and the Jews is more than overstated. Is this Aqiba story a rabbinic equivalent of George Washington and his cherry tree?

I do not relish playing the curmudgeon and bursting the bubble of the too-easy narrative of Us versus Them—foxes v. fish. But martyr stories are simple, even simplistic, while history is messy and complex. It’s bad enough that we tell a tale of a martyrdom that may not have happened; it is made worse when the tale is taken utterly out

of context and the Talmud then pretends that Rome was the implacable enemy of Judaism everywhere in the empire and for all of its lengthy history. Indeed, I do you a disservice simply contrasting Jews v. Romans, for the Jews *were* Romans. Let me give you a different analogy, one that does not involve chatting animals—after all, are we really meant to learn Jewish cultural history from talking fish?

In a twentieth-century analogy, I might say that Germany was the implacable enemy of Judaism for all time, throughout the reaches of all Germanic-speaking countries, as many Jews today, in fact, do say. But while this proposition certainly strikes a post-Holocaust chord, it also denies so much of the richness of German and of German-Jewish culture throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It might be emotionally satisfying to condemn all things German as simply being Nazi; but to deny German influence on the development of modern Jewish culture cripples our ability to understand Judaism in the twenty-first century.

I ask you the same questions about the latter half of the first century that we ask about the second half of the twentieth century: What does it mean to be a Jew in the decades following the destruction of the center of Jewish life? How did they recover from the deaths of immense numbers of fellow Jews? Is it possible to go on and regroup? Can we conceive of a new type of Judaism rising from the ruins of the devastation? Could we imagine a revival of Judaism in the Land of Israel itself? Could a powerful Jewish community live comfortably in the Diaspora? Is it possible that the new Judaism that grew, nourished on the ruins of what came before, might reflect the values of the very culture that destroyed its earlier center?

For almost a century, modern historians have debated these questions about the (re)birth of Judaism in the wake of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple cult by the Romans two millennia earlier, in 70 CE. The Greco-Roman culture in which rabbinic Judaism grew in the first five centuries of the Common Era nurtured the development of Judaism as we still know and celebrate it today. It is not coincidental that the Judaism of now, particularly American Judaism, which flourishes as a minority religion within the Christian empire that is America, sees itself reflected in the

development of the religion of the rabbis of the Roman world.

We can look back on those leaders of the Jewish community and all too often see a version of ourselves. They, as we have done post-Holocaust, adapted to their surroundings, at first to ensure their survival. Eventually they flourished. Just as we bear witness to the horrors of the Holocaust and it shapes our idea of what it means to be Jewish, so the rabbis held firm to the memory of destroyed Jerusalem even as they built a very different Jewish life—no longer one of animal sacrifice, priests, and kings. Rather, the rabbis made Jews and Judaism into the people of the Book, a religion based upon the study and interpretation of the Torah—a Judaism that was Western, essentially Roman. Using the rabbis' tales and other evidence, I retell their stories, which is their history.

Because I want to learn the lessons of history, I must ask: Do those ancient Jews look like me because they *were* like me? Do I see the rabbis on their rounds as unique and particular to their own day and age—mediating between the Roman overlords and the remnants of their Israelite religion and culture? Or do I see them as being like so many American Jews, getting along, assimilating as much as necessary and then some, running a risk of disappearing into the larger culture? Or can I try to see them as they perhaps saw themselves, making their way in a world where it seemed that God might have abandoned them and their Holy City, yet nevertheless desperately trying to find a way to hold on and keep the faith?

If this book places the rabbis and the Judaism they invented into their own historic Roman context, it is worth a moment to set this book itself in context as a product of twenty-first-century American Judaism. This modern perspective of American Judaism as a flourishing minority religion in the broader Christian culture is what makes the ancient story seem so familiar. But it runs the risk of our misunderstanding the milieu of the rabbis in the Roman Empire. Allow me to explain by means of another fox fable. This one is from Aesop:

There once was a fox walking by the riverside. That fox had caught a fish and was preparing to eat it when he gazed into the river and caught a glimpse of his reflection.

Thinking he had seen another fox with a fish in its mouth, he opened his jaws to snatch away that fox's prize. Of course, no sooner had he opened his jaws than the fish he had already caught leapt back into the water and swam away.

The moral to the story is that what he wanted in his greed he could not have, and further; he lost what he already had.

The moral to Aesop's fox fable also is found in the Babylonian Talmud (Sota 9a), and it offers a lesson to heed. Writing the story of the invention of Judaism during the Roman Empire, I run the danger of seeing only my own reflection as an American Jew. So, *caveat lector*, as the Romans used to say—"read with care" and with the knowledge that my biases as writer and yours as reader may cause us to see things in the rabbis and the Romans that reflect us all only too well. We may marvel at how much they were just like us. How readily the rabbis invented a Judaism that allowed Jews to have the best of both worlds—the Judaism of their ancestors, albeit somewhat transformed, and the best of Roman (read: Western) culture, with but slight adjustment. This should give us a few moments' pause. Has my presentation simply reinforced what we all already think about our own circumstance?

I hope to tell the story straightforwardly. Yet I am limited not only by my current situation and the confines of my limited vision, but also by the reliability of my sources. As for methods, I seek to narrate the moments of Judaism's birth, as though it were the goddess Venus rising from the sea, or the divine Athena leaping from the head of Zeus. You see my problem—it is fairly easy to turn to Roman myths to narrate Jewish events, which underscores the point I am trying to make. I already read the history of the early rabbis through the lens of Greco-Roman culture.

Most of the stories I discuss were composed orally in the rabbinic circles of the first five centuries CE in Roman Palestine. Of course, all of these texts understandably have a decidedly pro-rabbi bias. These traditions are the very ingredients that helped to bake the cake of Judaism. But it is precisely the religious bias of these texts that makes

them unreliable as historical documents. To state it as baldly as possible: None of the narratives of the rabbis in this period are about history. They are about law, lore, folk cures, religious practice, ethics, belief—each of which all but precludes us from knowing “what really happened.” Yet the very legal and literary qualities of the rabbinic library allow us to compare these works to Roman literature and see the strong affinities between them.

Still other stories I quote are pagan Roman, Greek, and Christian. Each of these may have its own prejudiced view of Judaism. For many, their biases will be self-evident. It is sufficient to remember that they view Judaism as “them,” not “us.” But in all of these cases, my ability to compare rabbinic texts to non-Jewish texts allows me to show the broader context of Roman culture.

I make use of some nontextual materials as well. Here, folks often get excited because art and archeology, artifacts, seem to be historical facts. But art and architecture are also a form of text that need to be read and analyzed, and often are subject to heated debate and interpretation. The past is a cipher and I do not necessarily hold the decoder. So I gather provisional information, array the pieces of the puzzle, rejoice when they seem to fit together, and try my best to get a view of the broader Roman context and hope that it is “true.”

As we look at that big picture, we note that there in the corner, concealed in the details, sits our much-fabled fox. That sly animal is a potent symbol for the nexus of Roman and early Jewish culture. Just as Roman moralists trotted out the fox, as it were, for a rhetorical flourish or to make their point, so too did rabbis know when to deploy that sly fellow for maximum effect. A marvelous example of the power of the fox fable may be found in the fifth-century Midrash on Leviticus, where we are told (in folksy Aramaic):

Shimeon son of Rabbi [Judah the Patriarch] made a wedding feast for his son. He invited all of the rabbis, but neglected to invite Bar Kappara; who went and wrote [graffiti?] on the gate of the banquet hall: “After rejoicing comes death; so what’s the point of rejoicing?”

Shimeon asked, “Who did this to me? Is there someone we didn’t invite?” They told him that he had neglected Bar

Kappara. He said, “We’d better invite him now, lest he become an enemy.” So he threw a second banquet, inviting all of the rabbis, this time including Bar Kappara.

When each course of the banquet was brought out to the guests, Bar Kappara stood and entertained them with three hundred fox fables. The guests were so entranced that they didn’t touch their food and it grew cold—until each dish was returned to the kitchen untouched. (Lev. Rabbah 28:2)

Too bad we no longer have the obviously compelling fables Bar Kappara told to distract the wedding guests from their dinners. This delicious example of rabbinic cattiness (or should I say foxiness?) hinges on the popularity of Hellenistic fox fables. The moral of this story could well be: revenge is a dish best served cold. If I may add two tasting notes to this tale: First, Bar Kappara is the son of an early rabbi, Rabbi Elazar HaKappar. Elazar has the distinction of being one of the very few rabbis whose name is preserved in an ancient inscription. Second, the groom in this story is the grandson of Rabbi Judah the Patriarch, editor of the Mishnah. The rabbis lived in a cozy world where they all went to the same schools and lived, as it were, in the same zip codes.

This tale of fox fables makes it clear that the rabbis were comfortable in both Hebrew and Aramaic. But the story also uses the Greek and Latin term for banquet dishes, neatly transliterated into Hebrew characters. In fact, there are thousands of loanwords from Greek and Latin found in the literature of the rabbis. That is a huge penetration of culture, on a par with the ubiquity of American English terms found throughout the world today.

I conclude with one final fox fable about Jacob and Esau, the eponymous ancestors of the Jews and Romans. In the biblical book of Genesis (ch. 32–33), when Jacob confronted his brother, Esau, after having cheated and then fled from him two decades earlier, he feared the reunion. In his panic, Jacob divided his sons into camps, fore and aft, in anticipation of a violent reception. Yet when he finally met his brother, he was greeted with a kiss and a forgiving welcome. Still, Esau is the rabbis’ symbol of all that is bad about Rome, so they cannot even read his reception of Jacob positively. The rabbis say if

Esau kisses you, you should count your teeth afterward. Yet even the rabbis cannot ignore the fact that Esau is Jacob/Israel's twin brother. Perhaps that is why, above all else, they chose Esau as the symbol of Rome.

In the commentary to the passage in Genesis 33:1, which recounts the reunion of the brothers, Midrash Genesis Rabbah (78:7) teaches,

Once the lion was angry with all the animals. They asked one another, "Who will go and reconcile with him?"

The fox said, "I will lead the way, for I know three hundred fox fables which can assuage him."

All the animals said, "Let's go [*agomen*]!"

They walked a bit and he stopped. The animals asked the fox, "Why have you halted?" He confessed, "I have forgotten a hundred fables."

They said, "No matter, two hundred fables are a blessing." They walked a bit and the fox stopped again. The animals asked the fox, "Why have you halted?" He confessed, "I have forgotten another hundred fables."

They said, "No matter, even one hundred fables are a blessing."

When they arrived at the lion's lair the fox cried, "I've forgotten them all! Every man for himself!"

I should note that when the animals in the fable say "let's go," they do so in Greek, neatly transliterated into Hebrew letters. In the Hebrew Bible's narrative, Jacob begins with bravado, yet by the time he reaches Esau he has essentially told his sons, "Every man for himself!"

In the rabbis' own story, they are Jacob. They approach Esau, Rome, with caution. They understand very well that the fox fable, or, if you will, Roman rhetoric, is the way to approach the Roman other and to show that we are one and the same, twin brothers who share a lineage. Over time, we have forgotten some, even much, of the common language of Greco-Roman culture that marked Judaism as part of the Hellenistic household. In the immediate centuries following the destruction of Jerusalem, as again today, it seemed that Judaism

resembled the fox's "every man for himself."

And in a way, it is also "every man for himself" as we evaluate the stories in this book and how I present them as evidence of how the Jews adapted Roman culture to create Judaism. Then and now, our shared heritage of Hellenism remains a source of self-identity. Looking back, we can discern the path by which the rabbis chose to take the best that the Roman world offered them and see how they reshaped it so that Judaism could survive. Knowing that this synthesis between the Temple cult and Hellenism created a vibrant Judaism that survived two millennia is heartening. Reflecting on that dual history reveals who we are. At this inflection point in Jewish history, it may also help us discern the truth of who we yet might become.

Judaisms of the Oikoumene: Who Were the Jews in the Roman World?

Judaisms of the OY what?” *Oikoumene* is a Greek word, but one that has currency in English in the term “ecumenical.” In Late Antiquity, the *oikoumene* was the Hellenistic world, the lands of the Greco-Roman Empire. In the Jewish-Roman world, this included all of the varieties of Judaism found throughout the Roman Empire—what Solomon Schechter a century ago quaintly called “catholic Israel”—hence *Judaisms*. While it is true that in this book I essentially equate “Judaism” with the Judaism of the rabbis, I want to put that particular Judaism into the context of the many other, more or less Hellenized varieties of nonrabbinic *Judaisms* throughout the empire in our period.

This penchant for equating all “Judaism” with the Judaism of the rabbis is due to the success of rabbinic Judaism as the dominant mode of Jewish expression, perhaps as early as the end of Late Antiquity and onward through modernity. In recent decades, thanks in part to archeological and manuscript discoveries, other *Judaisms* have begun to be recovered by historians, so that rabbinic Judaism can now be placed in a much broader context. In America, declining synagogue membership has been complemented by a rise in other expressions of Jewish culture, resulting in a greater interest and ease in speaking of Judaism in multiple forms.

In truth, there have always been varieties of Judaism, even when

the Jerusalem Temple dominated Israelite religious practice in the Ancient Near East. Jews nostalgically recall a time when the priests served God in Jerusalem and, encouraged by the exclusivist strictures of the biblical book of Deuteronomy, recall that Temple as the *omphalos te's ge's*. This Greek phrase implies that the Temple was the center of the universe, but literally translated it means “belly button of the world.” In the rabbinic imagination, if one were to unhinge that belly button, primordial chaos would engulf the world.

But the Hebrew Bible reluctantly acknowledges that even when the Jerusalem Temple was first built, there were rival altars and sanctuaries. When King Solomon’s Temple was destroyed, in 586 BCE, and Jews were exiled to Babylonia (modern Iraq), some remnant of the Judean community remained in the Holy Land. They called themselves Samaritans, which means “the preservers or guardians,” and they built a sanctuary to replace the destroyed First Temple. Their own Temple was built in Samaria (modern Nablus), on Mt. Gerizim. This mountain is mentioned in the biblical book of Deuteronomy as the site of the blessings and imprecations that Moses commanded the Levites to offer at the Israelites’ entrance into the Promised Land. The Samaritans persisted as a distinct group throughout the Israelite exile and became a rival form of Jewish presence in the Land of Israel. Even when the Second Temple was built, they persisted. In fact, the Samaritans remain on Mt. Gerizim to this very day, still performing biblically enjoined sacrifices!

There were yet other sanctuaries that sought to rival the Jerusalem Temple. Egypt was one place where non-Jerusalem practices flourished. There was a Temple on the Nile Island of Elephantine that dates back to the biblical period. There are small archeological traces at the site, as well as records preserved on papyrus. The Elephantine papyri offer evidence of a community living as part of the military outpost on that Nubian island as early as the fifth century BCE. There also was a Jewish Temple complex at Leontopolis in the Nile delta region of Heliopolis, the site of the biblical city of On. That Temple persisted for two to three hundred years and seems to have been destroyed about the same time as the Second Temple in Jerusalem, which is to say ca. 70 CE. In other words, throughout the “Second Temple period,” there were Egyptian Jewish centers to rival Jerusalem

and its priesthood.

Alexandria was also home to a large community of Jews. The Egyptian city was founded in the fourth century BCE by Alexander the Great, and the Jews there thrived under Hellenistic rule. The most famous product of that community may well have been the third-century BCE Greek translation of the Torah, called the Septuagint. The mythic story of that translation says that the Jewish residents of Alexandria reached out to the Jerusalem Temple authorities for assistance in the translation project. By the first century BCE, Alexandria had a highly Hellenized Jewish population, though they maintained their own separate Jewish political structure. The city produced the famous turn-of-the-millennium Jewish philosopher Philo, who wrote an allegorical commentary on the Torah, attempting to reconcile it with Hellenism. The multivolume work is a fascinating peek into the mind of a highly educated Jewish leader. Philo relied wholly on the Septuagint Greek translation, as he apparently had poor command of Hebrew.

Philo's nephew, Tiberius Julius Alexander (love that nice Jewish name), was sufficiently assimilated to Hellenism that he abandoned his roots in the Jewish community entirely. Perhaps he found his uncle's writings and disquisitions, or the Alexandrian community itself, just too boring—some things never change. In any case, the first-century CE Jewish historian Josephus reports that Tiberius Julius Alexander demonstrated his loyalty to *Rome* by commanding army troops who first acted against the Alexandrian Jewish community and then besieged Jerusalem in the years 66–70 CE! While Uncle Philo saw the relationship between Judaism and Hellenism as a “both/and,” his nephew saw it as a stark “either/or,” in which Judaism lost the battle.

The Jewish community of Alexandria persisted into the second century, when it suffered severely in the anti-Jewish rioting of 115–117 CE, sometimes referred to as the Great War of the Diaspora. In that period, riots broke out throughout many of the Mediterranean and North African Jewish communities. Pagan locals' resentment of the special privileges that many of the Jewish communities received from Rome resulted in vicious pogroms that decimated the Jewish-Roman world. This may have been a mortal blow to the existence of a

separate Jewish community in Alexandria. Nevertheless, the reputation of that ancient Jewish community persisted, so that in the early third century the rabbis could imagine nostalgically:

Rabbi Yehudah said, “Anyone who did not behold the double-columned [*diplostaton*] synagogue of Alexandria of Egypt never really appreciated the greatness of the Jews. It was a *basilica* that had columns [*stoa*] within columns. There were times when it held double the number that left Egypt [=1,200,000!]. There were seventy-one golden thrones [*kathedra*], one for each of the elders . . . and there was a dais [*bema*] of wood in the center and the director of the congregation stood there with a cloth [*soudarion*] in hand. When they prayed he would wave the cloth so they could reply “amen” to each and every blessing, and then the next one further down would wave his cloth so the rest could respond, “amen.”

They did not sit mixed, but by guilds: the goldsmiths sat together, as did the silversmiths, the weavers, the bronze workers and iron workers. Why? So that strangers [*ksenoi*] who came could be accepted by those who shared their craft, and they would thus find employment. (Tosefta Sukkah 4:6)

This is a rabbinic fantasy; but the story they tell of the synagogue of Alexandria is instructive. To begin with, they use seven Greek loanwords (in italics above) in two short paragraphs. The rabbis contemplate a synagogue so large that it could hold over a million Jews, or, as they put it, “double the number that left Egypt.” There is a delicious irony here: the rabbis imagine such huge numbers *in* Egypt, all those centuries after the biblical Exodus. The synagogue architecture they project onto Alexandria, a basilica building with diplo-stoa, or two sets of columns, was exactly the kind of Greco-Roman architecture that the rabbis saw in synagogues throughout the Land of Israel in their own times. And, like modern Orthodox synagogues of today, they apparently did not use microphones on

Shabbat.

Were there other Hellenistic Jewish communities in the predestruction period? Yes, indeed. In the very epicenter of Hellenism, Athens, there is evidence of an ancient synagogue. St. Paul visited and preached there, as is mentioned in Acts 17:16–17. By the way, the New Testament is often a good source for information about early Jewish communities, especially because Paul worked and wrote his famous Epistles in the 50s, a generation before Jerusalem's destruction. Five centuries later, the rabbis took notice of the Athenians, making them the butt of rabbinic humor. Here is an example:

An Athenian came to Jerusalem where he met a child. He gave him some coins and said to him, "Go bring me figs and grapes." The child bought the fruits and replied to the Athenian, "Thank you, you with your money and I with my legs."

So the man said to him, "Take and share it." The child took the bruised fruit for himself and set the good before the stranger.

The man exclaimed, "Well done! Rightly do they say that the people of Jerusalem are very clever. Since this child was aware that the money was mine, he gave me the better and took the bad."

The child thereupon replied, "Come, now, let's throw dice. If I throw and win, then I take your share; but if you win you take my share." And so it happened that the child took the best fruit for himself. (Lam. Rabbah 1:6)

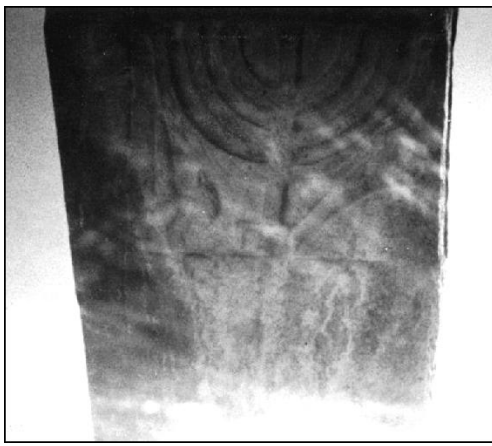
Clearly the rabbis were tired of hearing about the wise men of Athens. Fellows like Plato and Socrates were smart but, in rabbinic eyes, were no match for a savvy Jewish kid from Jerusalem. If the church father Tertullian asked, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"—the rabbis of this story have a witty riposte.

The other axis of the Greco-Roman world was the great city of Rome herself. Jews were certainly there from the first century BCE.

They are mentioned in the New Testament, and there are historical texts speaking of expulsions of Jews from Rome under the emperor Tiberius (14–37 CE) and again under Claudius (41–54 CE). Between their reigns, the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria traveled to Rome in 39–40 CE on an embassy to the crazy emperor Gaius Caligula. Philo describes the Jewish community across the River Tiber in Rome as “citizens who had been emancipated . . . liberated by their owners and not forced to violate their native institutions.” Philo goes on to remark that the Jews of Rome have “houses of prayer” where they “meet on sacred Sabbaths to receive training in their ancestral philosophy.” Further, he reports, “they collect money for sacred purposes from their first fruits and send them to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices.” A decade or so later, St. Paul wrote his famous Epistle to the Romans, addressing it to portions of the Jewish community.

Although there have been no archaeological remains of synagogue buildings found in Rome proper, there are ruins of a synagogue at the old port of Rome: Ostia Antica. What survives is minimal, but enough for scholars to guess that the synagogue was there from the first through the fourth or fifth centuries. The most notable Jewish feature is a column—technically an architrave—with an incised menorah, a ram’s horn (*shofar*), and the biblically enjoined palm frond and citron (*lulav* and *etrog*—used for the holiday of Sukkot). These symbols are regularly found in synagogues across the Roman Empire from this period.

Among the vast array of funerary inscriptions (approximately six hundred) in the Jewish catacombs underneath Rome itself, there are references to a dozen other synagogues. These may not all have existed simultaneously, as the catacombs date from the second through the fourth or fifth centuries CE. In addition to inscriptions, the Roman Jewish catacombs have yielded wall frescos, sarcophagi, lamps, gold glassware, and other artifacts.



OSTIA ANTICA SYNAGOGUE



CATACOMB INSCRIPTION WITH MENORAH, RAM'S HORN, PALM FROND, AND CITRON

The catacombs, not surprisingly, produce a rich picture of at least one essential aspect of the Roman Jewish community: their attitudes toward death, burial, and life in the hereafter (or lack thereof). The inscriptions also list names of the deceased and, in many cases, their ages at death. Virtually all of the inscriptions are in Latin and Greek.

In the pre-70 era, when the Temple still stood, there were already a fair variety of expressions of Judaism. The Greek works of Philo and Josephus teach us in particular about three differing sects of Judaism, enumerated by them as Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes. I have spoken a bit about Philo of Alexandria already. Josephus was a different kind of bird entirely. All of the works by Josephus are preserved in Greek, but it is clear that he himself was a native Hebrew and Aramaic speaker; and his own Greek was less than polished. He

had a secretary to style edit for him. Josephus has left us a kind of commentary on the Torah (as did Philo, but his was allegorical). Josephus called his work *archeology* in Greek—probably best translated as “Antiquities.” Josephus also left an account of the War against Rome from 66 to 70. He began the war as a priest in Jerusalem, then abandoned his Jewish brethren to side with Rome and ended his days as a hanger-on in the palace of Titus, the emperor who destroyed the Temple. That such a man left a self-serving autobiography comes as no shock. Yet historians of the period must make do with what contemporaneous sources as there are, no matter how tendentious.

A close reading of these two Jewish, first-century Greek writers, combined with some other literary records, shows us that the Essenes are probably more than one group, depending upon location and era. Philo distinguishes between the Essenes and the Therapeutae. These latter seem to have been a group of Jewish ascetics in the Alexandria region. Philo notes that the Essenes were an exclusively male community, while the Therapeutae admitted women; yet both sects practiced forms of sexual abstinence. I note that these guys were Jews. Josephus and Philo each describe the Essenes as dining exclusively within the confines and purity strictures of their own community. They also practiced other forms of asceticism as well as fervid devotion to their leadership. To the extent that the Essenes are identified with the Jewish separatists from Qumran described in the Dead Sea Scrolls (a point still debated among scholars), these Jews also actively rejected the Jerusalem Temple and declared its priesthood corrupt and unacceptable. What is common among all three of these subgroupings—Essenes, Therapeutae, and the Dead Sea covenanters—is their membership in an “outsider” community by individual choice rather than by birth.

The Dead Sea Scroll community lived in isolation for a number of generations. Although they were but a short journey from Jerusalem, they rejected urban life and Temple ritual; but they may have performed their own sacrifices at one time. They adopted a very rigorous set of purity and food laws, and their Sabbath observances were most stringent. The surviving manuscripts reveal an apocalyptic mentality that imagined the end of days upon them and the war of the

sons of Light (them) v. the sons of Darkness (everyone else, but especially Romans and other Jews) already begun. In short, these pre-70 CE anti-Temple groups saw themselves as the sole possessors of truth and the only authentic Jews of their day.

The Sadducees were depicted across ancient sources in a very different light. Hailing from priestly family backgrounds, they wielded power in part by cooperating with the Roman authorities. They are often described as the Jerusalem Temple establishment. Josephus and the New Testament draw sharp theological contrasts between the Sadducees and the Pharisees. The Sadducees are described as rejecting the notion of bodily resurrection—a tenet embraced by early Christianity as well as Pharisaic and, later, rabbinic Jews. Further, the Sadducees are depicted as rejecting the validity of received tradition in favor of the written Torah law. Historians even today describe the Sadducees as the “patrician” upper class of Jewish society. Whether this is a fact of late Second Temple history or a fancy of twentieth-century Marxist historiography, it does have support from New Testament descriptions of the Sadducean sect. The Sadducees are also described as arguing with the Pharisees over the minutiae of purity rules, even as they sat together on the ruling council of the Jerusalem Sanhedrin. That term *Sanhedrin* is used in the New Testament and throughout rabbinic sources (transliterated into Hebrew characters), and it is borrowed from the name of a Greco-Roman ruling council.

Not all of the Temple priests were necessarily Sadducees. The historian Josephus, himself from a priestly family, writes in his autobiography that after trying out each of the major sects, he chose to affiliate with the Pharisees. Perhaps we should understand the New Testament’s claim that the Pharisees were eager to seek converts in this light: that they sought other *Jews* to join their sect (like certain Hasidic groups do today). In addition, it seems clear that in the Late Second Temple period there were priests who remained unaffiliated with any of the variously identified sects. Following the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, certain priests or priestly groups may have even continued to hold sway over some segments of the Jewish population in the South of Palestine, as well as in the Galilee.

The Pharisees for their part are described by Josephus as urban, yet maintaining the loyalties of the villagers. They promoted fidelity

to the teachings their ancestors handed down, in addition to those laws actually written in the Torah. Josephus explicitly likens Pharisees to the Greco-Roman Stoic philosophers. Most modern historians see the Pharisees as the forebears of the rabbinic movement. But recently, some Jewish historians have exercised caution at too easily identifying the Pharisees as the spiritual ancestors of the rabbis.

In the New Testament, the Pharisees are depicted as the opposition to Jesus. As such, the name *Pharisee* continued to be used as a term of opprobrium into the twentieth century. Later Jewish sources offer a view of the Pharisees as a liberal and inclusive group of Jews who claimed access to nonscriptural traditions, yet were nonetheless punctilious regarding food and Sabbath laws, purities, and tithing. I emphasize these various groups in order to display the bewildering varieties of Judaism that existed even before the central Jerusalem shrine was destroyed.

One final group of Jews in the Land of Israel were the revolutionaries who fueled the insurrection of 66–70 CE. Not all of those who arose in opposition to Rome can be collapsed into one general category. As is common even today among such revolutionary groups, the narcissism of petty differences loomed large. The various revolutionary groups included Zealots, *Sicarii*, and *Biryoni*, but we have no clear information regarding them. As the rabbis of the Palestinian Talmud (j. Sanhedrin 10:5) later noted, “The Jews were not exiled from Jerusalem until there were twenty-four sects” dividing one Jew from another.

When the Roman legions destroyed the Jerusalem Temple and razed the city in 70 CE, Judaism in the Land of Israel, as well as throughout the Diaspora, changed in profound and lasting ways. During the years of the rebellion (66–70 CE), groups such as the Zealots and *Sicarii* were killed off by the Roman armies. The separatists at Qumran on the shore of the Dead Sea vanished from the historical record. The neat division Josephus had offered of Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes ceased to be meaningful. The priesthood could no longer serve in Jerusalem. Those Mediterranean communities that had sent funds and offerings to Jerusalem could no longer do so. A long process of rebuilding—even reinventing—Judaism ensued, renegotiating relationships with Gentile neighbors, the Roman Empire,

and the nascent Christian community.

It was precisely at this moment in time that something new came to the fore: Judaism. This was a Hellenistic religion in which canon—the formation of a community around a shared work of literature (itself a Hellenistic concept)—became the basis for a common Judaism across the Empire. It is not coincidence that Philo and Josephus, each publishing his work in Greek, felt the need to explicate the Greek translation of the Jewish Scripture. Indeed, the translation and their very commentaries helped shape that canon and fix it into the form it retains today: the Bible.

A common core of Jewish practice was more or less shared by Jewish communities across the vast breadth of the Roman world; yet it may have been no more than a patina. It seems that almost all groups that identified as Jewish shared Greek as one of the languages they employed. They each had particular food laws (although not necessarily all the same ones), they lit lamps for a Sabbath meal on Friday nights, they refrained from labors of various sorts on Saturdays and on various holidays already mentioned in the Bible, and they had some physical communal institution where they gathered. This amalgam is a fair amount of the common Judaism by which non-Jews across the Roman Empire might identify Jews as “other.” But if these few rituals and customs separated the Jews, it was their shared Hellenism that united them with one another, as well as with the pagans of the empire.

What made Judaism into what it continues to be to this very day were the rabbis’ interpretations of the Jewish written canon, as well as the oral laws and customs that they claimed had been part of God’s revelation to the Jews since Moses stood at Sinai. Indeed, the very emphasis on the revelation at Sinai as the signal event forming Jewish identity was itself a Roman-era novelty. During the biblical era the exodus from Egypt was the seminal event of Israelite history. Only after the Temple was destroyed and Judaism reconstituted around the Book did it become necessary to shift emphasis to Sinai.

Before I discuss the rabbis and their affinities for things Greco-Roman, I want to survey what we know of the emerging Jewish world after the destruction of the Temple in 70, as I promised at the outset of this chapter. At the western edge of what is now Europe, the church

father St. Irenaeus lived in the Roman town of Lugdunum, Gaul (now Lyon, France), during the late second century. In his writing against Christian heresies, Irenaeus kvetches about the Jews of western Europe, decrying their interpretations as false and their refusal to recognize Christ as the very essence of heretical behavior. But whether these were actual Jews he was railing against, or merely Jews who served him as straw men in his rhetoric against Christian heresies, is unclear. We do not know much else about these Jews, so it is instructive to read what later rabbinic works say about them and their imagined love-hate relationship with the priesthood of the Jerusalem Temple back when it still stood. It is equally unclear to me whether the rabbis themselves knew actual Jews from Spain and France or whether they, too, mention them symbolically as Jews at the far end of the known world. The rabbis of fifth-century Galilee may, in fact, be projecting onto their Western European brethren their own ambivalences about the long-destroyed Temple.

“When a person offers a grain offering to God, it shall be of fine flour . . . that he shall bring to Aaron’s sons, the priests; who shall take a handful of the fine flour. . . .” (Lev. 2:1–2) Rabbi Hiyya taught. . . . See them come all the way from Gaul [France] and Spain and other lands nearby. Then they see the priest [*kohen*] grab a mere handful of the grain-flour offering for the altar and eat the rest himself. They will say, “Oy for me who took all this trouble to make pilgrimage so that this guy gets to eat!”

They assuage him by saying, “If the priest who took but two steps between the courtyard and the altar merited to eat—you who took all this trouble to come so far, how much the more so will you be rewarded!” (Lev. Rabbah 3:6)

It’s as though the pilgrims express their pique: “I came all this way and that fat *kohen* waddles over and eats my offering!?” I don’t know whether the rabbis’ consolation is any solace, but it doesn’t matter. They are speaking of these pious pilgrims as an act of biblical

interpretation that reflects their own concerns about how the sacrificial system worked. They look back four hundred years to a Temple long gone. The narrator of this tale speculates on what the pilgrims may have felt. As a result, we cannot learn about the actual history of the Jews of France and Spain then.

Sardis, on the other hand, was a major city of Asia Minor, and there is no doubting that Jews flourished there. Today, the site contains only the archeological dig. When my wife and I visited there a few years ago, we found that the synagogue was the largest building in town, smack in the center of the city next to the gymnasium. It is about the size of a football field, with a decorated niche for the Torah, and has a double entryway, so there is a huge main room and a smaller courtyard. The synagogue boasts mosaic pavement floors, a huge urn in the courtyard (perhaps for ritual washing?), and plaques on the walls with geometric decorations.



Geometric decorations often are found in pre-70 synagogues, which scholars attribute to reluctance on the part of synagogue officials or donors to depict living beings. This is taken to be an interpretation of the second of the Ten Commandments, against graven images. Later in this book we'll look at post-70 synagogue art

and see that there was little to no hesitation about pictorial representation of animals, humans, even God. The Jews of Sardis certainly did not seem to worry about the strictures of the Second Commandment. The synagogue at Sardis is replete with animal designs on the mosaic floors, which probably date from the third to the fourth centuries. Here, too, we find an elaborately carved menorah, but this one has an inscription with the name Socrates in Greek—likely the name of the donor, not the philosopher. There are other menorahs in evidence at the Sardis synagogue. At the front of the synagogue there is a large carved marble table—perhaps for public reading of the Torah. Curiously, the legs of the table are carved with bas reliefs of Roman eagles. These may be original to the synagogue, or perhaps they were reused from some other building project. Statues of lions flank both sides of the table.



SARDIS SYNAGOGUE

The inscriptions recovered from Sardis Jewry have been little discussed. One, in Hebrew, is limited to the word “Shalom.” Another, set in mosaic, refers in Greek to a “priest and teacher of wisdom.” This may have been the congregation’s religious leader, but he was not a

rabbi we know of from the Talmud. Elsewhere in town, biblical Hebrew names are found written in Greek in inscriptions, which often identify the one named simply as “citizen of Sardis.” It is tempting to interpret the accoutrements of the synagogue, such as the table and the urn, or amphora, through the rabbinic lens of Torah reading and ritual purity. But as the Gershwin brothers taught us, “It ain’t necessarily so.”

Another ancient city of Asia Minor, Aphrodisias, also is located in modern Turkey not far from Sardis. The extensive archeological site at Aphrodisias yielded a long Greek synagogue inscription among the many now piled up there. Listed alongside the row of names of the Jewish supporters of that synagogue are a group of townsfolk styled as “God-fearers,” which possibly refers to Gentiles who have adopted some Jewish customs or who have other affinities with the Jewish community, while not formally converting. This category of God-fearers or semi-converts is referred to in both rabbinic literature and church literature. But if I try *not* to read through rabbinic lenses, the only thing I can really say about the archeological remains at Aphrodisias is that the Jewish community had friends in the Gentile community. Perhaps they simply donated sufficient funds to the synagogue to have their names inscribed as “God-fearing.” Or perhaps they were non-Jews who were married to Jewish members of the Aphrodisias congregation. But in both of these possible scenarios, I run the danger of anachronizing from the customs of the current American Jewish community.

Antioch on the Orontes, also located in current-day Turkey, was a major center of the Roman East. Back in the day, Antioch’s Jews were wealthy enough to have influence beyond their own city. Rabbinic literature contains references to rabbis traveling from Roman Palestine north to Antioch to collect charitable funds for their students and poor. They tell of the time that

Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Aqiba went to the suburbs of Antioch to collect charity for the sages. There was a man there nicknamed “Father of the Jews” because he gave charity so generously. But then he lost his fortune. When he saw the rabbis coming to his house he

felt sick. His wife asked him what was the matter and he explained that the rabbis had arrived and he had nothing to contribute. His righteous wife asked, “Don’t we still have one field? Go sell half and give them the proceeds.”

He did so and when he gave them that small contribution they said, “May the Omnipresent restore your losses.”

The rabbis went their way and he went to plow his remaining half field. While plowing, his ox stumbled and the ground cracked open. There he found a treasure!

When the sages returned the next time they asked after him. They were told, “Who can even get in to see the Father of the Jews? He who has sheep, goats, oxen, donkeys, camels!”

When they came to him he said, “Your prayer has borne fruit, and then interest on the fruit!” (Lev. Rabbah 5:4)

Whether or not there actually was a man called “Father of the Jews” is incidental. The rabbis of fifth-century Galilee who wrote this little story about earlier rabbis imagined their Jewish neighbors to the north as quite well-off. Further, there is literary evidence that the Palestinian Jewish patriarch in the years ca. 364–396 CE carried on a correspondence with the great Antiochene pagan teacher of rhetoric, Libanius, who was supposed to be instructing his son (the boy took the money and spent it on a road trip).

In the same period, the fiery church father John Chrysostom railed against the Jews and the synagogue they attended in the Antioch suburb of Daphne, which was famous for its shrine to the Greek god Apollo. The synagogue in Daphne was called the Matrona, and according to Chrysostom, Jews there celebrated “Trumpets, Booths, and Fasts”—most likely the autumn festivals of Rosh HaShannah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot. Bishop Chrysostom also complains that pagans and Christians used that synagogue for the administration of vows, which they imagined to be especially effective there. He characterizes the Jewish fast as being accompanied by the ritual of taking off one’s sandals and going barefoot in the marketplace. He knows his own

congregants admire the synagogue as a place of books, and he excoriates his flock for going to the Jews of Daphne for healing remedies, spells, amulets tied on their arms, and potions.

All of this comports with the textual traditions about rabbinic Judaism of that era. In other words, there is both church and rabbinic evidence of a major Jewish community whose Judaism was not all that different from rabbinic Judaism. Rabbinic Jews took off their sandals when they fasted on Yom Kippur. They also tied “amulets” on their arms, in the form of phylacteries (*tefillin*). They said Hebrew prayers that would have sounded like spells to a Greek listener. And there were rabbis who were famous as healers. But the name of the synagogue, “the Matrona,” or Roman matron, doesn’t sit all that well as a name for a rabbinic locale. On the other hand, rabbinic literature does refer to a *matrona*. Scholars debate whether this word is a generic reference or a proper name. Here’s a tale of a matron or Matrona:

A matron [Matrona] asked Rabbi Yosé ben Halfota, “How many days did it take God to create the world?”

He replied, “Six days, as it is written (Ex. 31:17), ‘In six days God made the heaven and the earth.’ ”

She asked, “And what’s he been doing since?” . . .

Rabbi Berechiah said, this is what Rabbi Yosé ben Halfota answered her: “God is sitting and making ladders. Some folks get brought down, while others are raised up. As it is written (Psalm 75:8), ‘God judges, bringing one down and uplifting another.’” (Lev. Rabbah 8:1)

It is fairly clear from elsewhere in the story that this matron is not Jewish. But still, she would have liked Rabbi Yosé’s clever answer, for already in the second century a pagan writer had written that “Pittacus made a ladder for the temples in Mytilene, not for any purpose other than as an offering. His intention was to hint that fortune moves up and down, with the lucky, as it were, climbing up and the unlucky climbing down.”

Rabbis and pagans employed similar metaphors, perhaps particularly when speaking with one another. The Jews of Daphne

lived and worked in a suburb of Antioch famous for its pagan shrines. Indeed, some of those Jews probably worked in the tourist industry serving the pagan pilgrims. Others commuted into Antioch proper to work in the Roman government or to study. It is not very likely that the Matrona synagogue was named for a pagan, unless she was a donor, as at Aphrodisias. But what kind of synagogue might be named for a non-Jewish donor? And how much of a donation would *that* take? I think we are better off not trying to over-read the evidence one way or another. I am content to know that there was a large Jewish community in Antioch that attracted the attention of rabbis (for contributions) and church fathers (for censure).

Turning south, we come to the port town of Tyre in modern southern Lebanon. It is mentioned as a Jewish community by the New Testament, in Matthew 15. The later rabbis also know about it and what might be its very peculiar Jewish practices. In the fifth century they tell the story of a certain rabbinical student who perhaps got his Jewish law all mixed up:

Jacob of the village of Nevorayah once taught in Tyre that fish require kosher slaughter. Rabbi Haggai heard about this and sent him the message: “Come, be whipped!”

The student demurred, “Would you whip me for that which is taught in the Torah?” The rabbi patiently inquired, “And where in the Torah do you think it says that fish must be slaughtered according to rabbinic law [and not merely hauled out of the water]?”

Jacob offered, “It is written in Genesis 1:20, ‘Let the waters swarm with living creatures and birds that fly.’ Just as birds require kosher slaughter, so fish must require kosher slaughter,” he proclaimed.

Rabbi Haggai said, “You did not reason correctly.”

Jacob impudently asked, “Where will you prove this from?”

The teacher replied, “Bend over to be whipped while I prove it to you! It says in Numbers 11:22, “The cattle and beasts will ye slaughter . . . and the fish of the sea will ye

gather.' It doesn't say slaughter, but gather."

Jacob conceded, "Whip away, I guess I need the lesson."
(Gen. Rabbah 7:2)

Perhaps the Jews of Tyre had a different notion of what was kosher than did the rabbis to their south. This would be of some interest, as it might indicate a community that was actually more stringent than rabbinic laws dictate, at least when it came to eating fish. This is no small thing, as fish were undoubtedly a mainstay of the port community. But perhaps I should not jump to conclusions, as the stringency is laid at the feet of a zealous, if foolish, fellow. Later in the passage quoted, he offers his opinion that a child born of a non-Jewish mother can be circumcised on Shabbat. This is tantamount to saying that Jewish lineage follows the father's religion, an opinion diametrically opposed by the rabbis, who support the matrilineal principle. In fairness to poor Jacob of Nevorayah, in the Bible itself Israelite lineage is determined by patrimony, as he had ruled. But once again, Jacob was whipped by his rabbinic mentor.

Is this, then, a case of an outlier who simply does not know his stuff? Or might this indicate a very different custom in the Jewish community of Tyre? In one instance they would be zealous about preparation of fish. In the other they might follow what was biblical custom and prefer patrilineal descent as an indicator of Jewishness. Again, we simply cannot know.

To return to Roman Palestine, I remind you that the disastrous Bar Kokhba rebellion against Rome from 132 to 135 CE was fueled by zealotry and misplaced messianism. The extreme Roman repression of this rebellion, which centered in the Judean South, caused Jewry in the Land of Israel to become more concentrated in the Galilee. As a punishment for two successive revolts, from 66 to 70 CE and again from 132 to 135 CE, Rome banned Jews from Jerusalem, which was refounded as the pagan city Aelia Capitolina. Despite the ban, other Jewish centers did flourish in Judea, scattered from Gaza to Ein Gedi and Jericho. On the Mediterranean coast and in the Galilee, large Roman urban centers such as Caesarea, Tiberias, and Sepphoris anchored Jewish settlement. Each of these cities was thoroughly Hellenized, with pagan art prominent among the archeological

materials that remain. These same motifs are also found in the Byzantine-era synagogues of the Galilee. With very few exceptions, these synagogue buildings resemble the churches and Roman broad-house and basilica structures found locally. They are identified as synagogues primarily by details such as mosaics depicting biblical scenes (similar to those found in churches) and bas reliefs displaying menorahs, shofars, and the like. Of course these synagogues also display the ubiquitous donor inscriptions in Hebrew (rarely), Aramaic (often), and, in very significant measure, Greek.

Synagogues across the *oikoumene* served as places for many functions—praying, studying, having meals—and they often served as hostels for travelers or, possibly, as housing for officers of the Jewish community. They appear to have been places to deposit communal funds, hold communal gatherings (hence the Greek name: *synagogue*, whose literal meaning is “gather together”), administer oaths, and hold sessions of local Jewish tribunals. In virtually none of these functions did the synagogues of the Land of Israel differ appreciably from those of the Diaspora. Synagogues in the Holy Land and throughout the remainder of the Roman world also seemingly have in common their apparent ignorance of rabbinic law. I use the term “ignorance” consciously, for we cannot know whether they did not know about rabbinic law or whether they knew but simply ignored it. Very few of the synagogues’ physical remains thus far discovered follow rabbinic ordinances regarding the physical layout of the building and its entrances. If I were to rely only on archeological remains of synagogues and the inscriptions found there, I would be hard-pressed to know that rabbinic Judaism existed (let alone was founded) in Roman Palestine.

The one apparent exception to the rule among synagogues unearthed thus far is in the Beth Shean valley in northern Israel, a crossroads for travel both east to west and north to south. The Rehov synagogue there has a large mosaic floor that quotes from a range of still-extant rabbinic literature regarding the permissibility of Sabbatical-year agricultural produce that might otherwise be prohibited by biblical law (see Lev. 25). This mosaic text is the earliest physical quotation of rabbinic literature and the only mosaic discovered thus far that attests to the Judaism of the rabbis. Other

physical evidence for the rabbis of classical rabbinic literature comes from the Golan, east of the Jordan River, in the village of Dabbura. There, archeologists found a lintel that identifies the academy of Rabbi Eliezer Hakkapar, who is regularly mentioned in early rabbinic literature. Complicating matters, though, the lintel postdates the rabbi by a couple of centuries. Maybe the academy was named for him posthumously.

There is one other archeological site where rabbis are mentioned. In Beth Shearim, in the lower Galilee, the burial chambers of well-known Talmudic and political leaders, along with the family of the Palestinian Jewish patriarchs, were excavated in the late 1930s and again following World War II. Dozens of figures of menorahs are found in the catacombs there, as well as over two hundred Greek inscriptions. The very few Hebrew inscriptions consist of names, and repeatedly, the word *shalom*. There is even a dual-language inscription, first in Hebrew and then in Greek, of the name Rabbi Gamaliel, possibly the same rabbi who was patriarch of the Jewish community. Artistic motifs on the Beth Shearim sarcophagi include the ark or desert tabernacle, palm fronds, and lions (of Judah?)—all commensurate with rabbinic religion. But there are also eagles, bulls, Nike (the goddess of victory), Leda and the swan (aka Zeus), a theater mask, a spear-carrying warrior fragment, and yet other fragments of busts, statues, and bas reliefs of humans, none of which might be considered very “Jewish” by the rabbis of the Talmud. It’s hard to know what to make of this mishmash of pagan and Jewish burial symbols.

Even more confusing, perhaps, is the fact that in a number of synagogues from the Byzantine period that have been unearthed across the Galilee, the mosaics on the floors, most often in the central panels, display a zodiac with the twelve months, depicted in a circle enclosed in a square frame. At each corner of the square is a personification of the season of the year in that quadrant—except for the one mosaic, where the floor guy got the order of the seasons confused and laid them in the wrong corners. I suppose a zodiac is conceivably within the pale, except it has a whiff of paganism about it. But what is truly astonishing about these mosaics is that in the center of the circle in each of these synagogues, there is Zeus-Helios,

riding his quadriga (a chariot drawn by four horses) across the floor-bound sky!



BEIT ALPHA SYNAGOGUE MOSAIC, HELIOS



To say the least, the god Zeus is unexpected on a synagogue floor, and there is no scholarly consensus whatsoever as to what this possibly can mean about Judaism in Roman Palestine. The quadriga is, however, a fairly popular and perhaps even universal symbol of strength. Above is the famous quadriga atop Berlin's Brandenburg Gate.

But really, Zeus-Helios riding across the floor of Holy Land synagogues? We'll discuss this more later. But if we add to this artistic record the Samaritan's Temple on Mt. Gerizim (near modern Nablus), we must conclude that the overwhelming physical evidence of Judaism, even in Roman and Byzantine Palestine, is decidedly *not* the Judaism of the Talmudic rabbis.

At some point in the 220s CE, emerging rabbinic Judaism, now represented by a compendium of its teachings called the Mishnah, found its way from Roman Palestine eastward into the Sasanian Empire. In 224 the Sasanian army—which professed the religion of Zoroastrianism—conquered the Parthian Empire to Rome's east. Their laissez-faire treatment of non-Zoroastrians allowed for new expressions in the Jewish community. It helps us to recall that Jews had been part of that region, which they called Babylonia and we call Mesopotamia or Iraq, since the Babylonian exile in 586 BCE. This adds up to eight hundred years by 220 CE! Aside from what the Bible says—and that isn't very much—what is known about that region has been learned from the singular lens of the Babylonian Talmud, the quintessentially rabbinic Jewish document. But were there forms of Judaism situated somewhere between the Bible and the Talmud? Is there any evidence of Hellenistic influence on that Judaism, too?

By and large, I prefer to think of the Talmud as imbibing its Hellenism from the rabbinic traditions it imported from the rabbis of the Land of Israel, rather than to imagine Hellenistic influences in the severe Zoroastrian society of the Sasanian Empire. But Rome's empire stretched east while the Sasanians' stretched west, and just at the point where their borders met, at a town called Dura-Europos, was a

treasure trove of evidence about Jewish life in the first half of the third century CE. The town had served as a Roman garrison for approximately a century, from 166 to 256 CE, when it was destroyed by the conquering Sasanians. Following its destruction, it lay desolate, covered by sand until its rediscovery, beginning in the 1920s. Among the buildings that were excavated then were several temples to Roman and Eastern gods, as well as a church. The synagogue that was discovered on the street adjacent to the wall of Dura revealed floor-to-ceiling wall paintings of biblical scenes, neatly arrayed in three registers, surrounding a so-called “seat of Moses” and a shell-arched Torah niche. The paintings are captioned in Aramaic, Greek, and Persian. It is a spectacular archeological discovery with a clear date for the synagogue in the mid-third century, at the very moment when rabbinic Judaism first finds expression in Babylonia. The archeologists brought their finds to the Damascus Museum, where they are now largely inaccessible, except for a few images on the museum website. I fear for the survival of this archeological treasure and worry that it, too, may be destroyed in the seemingly endless battle that is consuming Syria.



DURA SYNAGOGUE, LONG WALL

The wall paintings are a mix of Roman and Persian styles, and the scenes of the Bible run the gamut from Jacob to Esther. Some of the scenes are not literal but are interpretive depictions of Bible stories. In these cases, the “texts” of the wall of the Dura-Europos synagogue

often predate existing works of rabbinic midrashic interpretations by centuries. The ceiling of the synagogue has been reconstructed. As usual, there is a donor inscription, found on one of the tiles and preserved in Aramaic. The finds at Dura-Europos show us a distinctly Jewish community living cheek by jowl with their Christian and pagan neighbors. The artistic and building conventions of that Jewish community are of the same style, if not content, as those of their neighbors. They apparently lived in comfort with the non-Jews of that town at the very border of the Roman world and died there together with them under the siege of their Sasanian enemy.

Ultimately, the Jews flourished under the Sasanian Empire, which persisted until the advent of Islam in the seventh century CE. This gave the Babylonian Jewish community about four hundred years to come thoroughly under the sway of the Talmudic rabbis. Later in this book, we will see that the already-existing bits of Hellenistic Judaism represented in the rich wall paintings at Dura complemented the Hellenism that the rabbis brought to Jewish Babylonia from Roman Palestine. Like the synagogue walls at Dura, the Babylonian Talmud is a rich amalgam of Eastern and Western cultures. Even the Jews living in Zoroastrian country could not help but be influenced by the magnetic pull of Hellenism to its west.

The Jews in Late Antiquity interacted with virtually every other religious group in the communities that were spread throughout the Roman *oikoumene*. Across the Roman world, Judaism simultaneously stood somewhat apart and distinctive from its neighbors, no matter what its expression. There was a common core of Judaism, which made it familiar to all who practiced it, no matter what the local details of that practice may have been. While this tempts us to equate these common Jewish practices, such as lighting Sabbath lamps or observing food strictures, with the observances of the rabbis, we can discern distinct customs from one Jewish community to another. Many of those communities preexisted rabbinic Judaism, so it is clear that they were not following the dictates of a small group of men in the Galilee. Even so, the Jewish practices they shared, for all of their local differences, made Judaism somewhat “other” to the pagan non-Jews who embodied the broader Greco-Roman culture. Yet under the aegis of Hellenism, the Judaisms of Late Antiquity in all of their

varieties were deeply part of the surrounding Roman culture.

Esau, Edom, Rome: What Did the Rabbis Really Say about the Romans?

For the Jews of the Roman Empire, the disastrous rebellion against Rome of 66–70 CE ended with the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. The Bar Kokhba debacle of 132–135 CE ended with a virtual exile of Jews northward to the Galilee. In between those devastations, rioting and police actions decimated the Jewish communities of North Africa in the period from 115 to 117 CE. These wars with Rome had a profound effect on the collective and individual Jewish psyche. Whether these wars represented a last-gasp effort to regain the quasi-independence the Jews had under the Hasmonean Maccabees, or whether they manifested a messianism gone awry, or even the flexing of Eastern provincial political muscle at times when the imperial center in Rome itself was thought to be weak, can never definitively be determined. The origins and causes of each outbreak remain multifaceted and obscure. Minimally, however, the three military engagements pushed the Jewish community to a more submissive stance in which “go along to get along” became the norm and Stoic passivism expressed the communal ethos. This engendered deeply complex attitudes about how the Jews saw Rome, as well as about the construction of their own Roman-Jewish identity.

Jews who were Romans had at once a strong sense of their Judaism and pride in their Roman citizenship. They held this latter quality despite their minority status and the earlier rebelliousness of a

militaristic subset of the community. In truth, during none of the three “wars” was the entirety of the Jewish community implicated. Each military disaster involved only a segment of the Jewish community, no matter how far-reaching the aftermath. So when the emperor Caracalla expanded citizenship to every potential taxpayer in 212 CE, Jews lined up to register themselves in the archives to become official citizens of the empire. When they did so, they took on Greek and Latin names: Reuven became Rufus, Joseph became Justus, Shimeon became Julianus, and Benjamin was now Alexander. At least this is the report of a fifth-century rabbinic commentary (Midrash Song of Songs 4:12), which says that the Jews of Egypt merited redemption for *not* changing *their* names—presumably unlike the Jews of the Roman Empire.

To say the least, there is a great deal of ambivalence regarding Rome lurking between the lines of the ancient rabbis’ books. While the rabbis consistently kvetch about the empire, the Rome they speak of changed over time. In the earliest rabbinic literature, indeed up to about 350 CE, “Rome” meant pagan Rome. But the latest layers of rabbinic literature deal with Christian Rome. While the rabbis’ relationship to Christianity is certainly very important, it is a topic for another book.

Here, I focus on the Roman Empire as the monumental representative of the Greco-Roman culture that ultimately gave rise to Judaism. The complex Jewish attitudes the rabbis express toward Rome find their origins in the Hebrew Bible. You might reasonably ask, “Where will we find the Roman Empire in the Bible?” The answer, surprisingly, lies in the book of Genesis. The trick is in knowing how to decode the text. The story begins with one of the most moving verses in the entire Bible. The matriarch Rebecca, after long being unable to conceive, finally becomes pregnant when her husband, Isaac, prays on her behalf. God responds to his prayer, and as with many modern pregnancies in which there has been an intervention, Rebecca finds herself pregnant with twins. It is a very difficult pregnancy; as the Bible puts it, “the children rumbled inside her” (Gen. 25:22). Rebecca, in despair, seeks an oracle and poignantly asks God, “Why me?” (Gen. 25:23). It’s the existential question

everyone asks at one time or another in life. And it is especially apposite to a woman pregnant with twins.

But these are not ordinary twins. Indeed, God tells Rebecca,

Two nations in your belly; two nations from your womb shall part. One will be stronger than the other; the elder to the younger enslaved. (Gen. 25:23)

Esau was born first; his younger brother followed, grabbing his heel, and so was called Jacob (which has the Hebrew word for “heel” as its root). Esau was, in modern parlance, macho, while Jacob was what we might call metrosexual. In the next ten verses, we learn that Esau hunted and Jacob stayed home. Dad loved Esau for the game he brings him, while Mom just loved her Jacob. When, one day, Esau was famished, young Jacob bought his birthright for a bowl of red (in Hebrew: *adom*) lentil porridge. Therefore, we are told, Esau was called Edom—a bad pun, to be sure, but the Bible and the rabbis love puns.

In the Bible, this birth begins an epic rivalry laced with hatred and murderous intentions. Rebecca’s oracle is the original self-fulfilling prophecy. The last of the classical prophets, Malachi, says it this way: “Is Esau not Jacob’s brother?” says the Lord. ‘Yet Jacob I love and Esau I hate’” (Malachi 1:2–3). Jacob, who becomes Israel, seems forever destined to conflict with Esau, aka Edom. Centuries later, in the earliest rabbinic commentaries, Esau or Edom symbolizes Rome. It is the Jews and Rome who now appear to some rabbis to be locked in a struggle for primacy.

Rebecca’s prophecy was interpreted as anticipating Israel’s final triumph and Rome’s eventual enslavement. History just has to play itself out for the Jews to rise from beneath the imperial boot. As the fifth-century Rabbi Nahman commented on the creation of the sun and moon, “So long as the great luminary shines, the lesser luminary is eclipsed. Only when the great luminary sinks from view does the lesser luminary shine forth. When Esau’s sun sets, then shall Jacob shine forth” (Gen. Rabbah 6:3).

But this black-and-white view is reductive and far too simple. After all, the Torah also reports that after Jacob flees Esau’s wrath, he ultimately returns home. On the very eve before he met Esau again

after two long decades, Jacob wrestled through the night and was renamed Israel (Gen. 32). When Israel finally met his brother, the much stronger, much-cheated Esau “ran to greet him, he hugged him, fell on his neck and kissed him; so they wept” (Gen. 33:4). A happy reunion after all? Well, it depends on how you read it. In a Torah scroll, the Hebrew word for “kissed him” has dots over it. What do these mysterious dots mean? Some rabbis say it means that the kiss was venomous, like the kiss of the spider-woman. Others say Esau bit him. Yet others say, when Esau kisses you, count your teeth afterward, he’s such a no-goodnik. One lone rabbinic voice says, “The kiss was a sincere kiss of brotherly love” (Sifre Num. #69 and Gen. Rabbah 78:9).

The reason for that final positive opinion lies in the recognition that Israel and Edom are nonetheless brothers, twins at that. When the rabbis chose a symbol for Rome it is true that they chose the one who was “set against them.” But we cannot ever forget that the classic rabbinic symbol picked to represent Rome is Jacob’s fraternal twin. It strikes me that in this choice of Esau as the symbol of Rome, the rabbis gave voice to the complexity of their relationship. Yes, Rome is rhetorically construed as the eternal enemy. Yes, Jews in the Land of Israel rebelled against Rome twice. Yes, Rome exercised a harsh hegemony against the Jews of Roman Palestine and elsewhere in the Empire.

But . . . but, but. But Rome behaved that way toward all its colonies, especially the rebellious ones. But Rome worked with and benefited from the Jewish populations in the empire. But Rome afforded Jews special privileges in their food distribution to its citizenry, giving the Jews separate kosher items. But Rome gave the Jews exemptions from military and other forms of government service due to Sabbath laws. But Rome recognized the Jewish patriarch in Palestine and gave him certain powers. But Rome kept the peace so long as there were no rebellions. But Rome built roads and aqueducts, regulated markets, established courts.

Once upon a time, the curiously named “Rabbi Judah son of Converts” said,

“How admirable are the deeds of this nation. They have

built markets, bridges, and bath-houses.” His colleague Rabbi Yosé was silent; but Rabbi Shimeon ben Yochai retorted, “Anything they have built has been for their own needs. They build markets so their whores have a place to ply their trade. Bath-houses to pamper themselves, and bridges to collect tolls and taxes.” (Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 33b)

Elsewhere Rabbi Hanina sourly notes, “Pray for the peace of the Empire; for were it not for the fear they inspire, people would swallow one another alive” (Avot 3:2). It is well to consider the ambivalence of the literature. Some rabbis sing Rome’s praises. Some are scathing in their scorn. Still others are silent.

In a narrative about the coming of the Messiah, the rabbis teach:

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi once asked the prophet Elijah, “When will the Messiah come?” He replied, “Go ask him. He sits among the paupers at the gates of Rome” . . .

He went and greeted him, “Peace upon you, my master and my teacher.”

He replied, “Peace unto you, son of Levi.”

Rabbi Yehoshua asked, “When will you come?”

To which the Messiah replied, “Today.”

Rabbi Yehoshua commented to Elijah, “He lied to me, for he said he would come today, yet has not come!”

Elijah explained, “He was quoting Psalm 95:7: ‘Today, if you would but obey God’s voice.’” (Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 98a)

There sits the Messiah patiently at Rome’s gate, awaiting his triumph. The future king of Israel is ready, if only the Jews could just for once obey God. Here the rabbis blame their subjugation not on Rome but on themselves. God’s kingship is the ultimate dominion; yet Rome will rule so long as God’s sovereignty is not fully accepted. This is the notion the Bible itself adopts to explain exile. God has not been defeated. Rather, God uses the foreign conqueror as God’s scourge. For

the rabbis, God and Rome work hand in hand in history. It is the divine destiny of the Jews ultimately to throw off the yoke of history and succeed someday in the messianic future to kingship over Rome. As Rome conquered Greece, so the rule of earthly kingdoms eventually will end and Israel will ascend. The irony is not lost on the rabbis. Rome's culture will influence the Jews and shape them, much as Greece had done to Rome in its turn. But that is, of course, messianic speculation.

There is no better embodiment of the Greco-Roman Empire than its founding conqueror, Alexander the Great. If the rabbis can imagine the Messiah at the gate of Rome wrapped in bandages, they mischievously imagine Alexander at another gate, fully bedecked in his armor, at the far end of his kingdom. Like everyone else in the empire, the rabbis told Alexander legends. I quote this one as it illustrates the rabbis' ambivalence toward the empire that Alexander represents. The rabbis' run-up to the Alexander tale is instructive as well, so allow me to spin this story at length. It starts with the same rabbi whose chat with the Messiah we just reported.

When Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi went to Rome he saw pillars of marble wrapped in tapestries so that they would not crack in the cold nor break in the heat. Next to the pillar he saw a pauper wrapped in a thin reed mat. Of the pillars the rabbi recited the first half of Psalm 36:7, "Your beneficence is like the mighty mountains." He commented, "When You bestow, You do so in abundance."

And of the poor man he recited the next part of the verse, "Your judgment is like the deepest depths." He said, "When You smite someone, you are punctilious in Your retribution!"

The tale is ambiguous. It would be too easy to blame Rome for showing more sympathy to the marble columns than it did to its own poor. Yet Rabbi Yehoshua chooses to frame this as a matter of God's enigmatic justice. When God chooses to reward, there is the magnificence of Rome. When God punishes, human suffering abounds.

The fifth-century Midrash continues in colloquial Aramaic:

Alexander of Macedon went to the Far Kingdom beyond the Mountains of Darkness. There he found a city called Cartagena that was entirely of women. They came out before him and declared, “If you make war against us and conquer us, your reputation will be that you destroyed a town of ladies. And if we conquer you, the word will go out that you were beaten in war by women. Either way, you won’t be able to show your face among the other kings.”

When he departed he inscribed on the city gate [*pylae*], “I, Alexander of Macedon, was a foolish king until I came to Cartagena and learned sound counsel from its women.”

The storyteller is parodying Rome’s pretensions to conquest. Alexander gets his comeuppance from the wise women of Cartagena. Where, pray tell, is this fabulous far-off city? It well might be Carthage, in North Africa. Alexander, of course, never got there, but that need not have stopped the rabbis from imagining him there for the sake of their satire. It is even more likely that they liked the name of the city as an amalgam of two words, the first Aramaic: *karta*, or city. The second word is Greek: *gynae*. Females know from visits to their *gynecologists* that this word means “women.” So the town named Cartagena translates as “city of women.”

The narrative continues with another Alexander legend, this one lampooning so-called Roman justice:

Alexander went on to a city called Afriki. They came out before him bearing apples, pomegranates, and loaves of bread, all made of gold. Alexander asked, “Is this what you have to eat here?”

They replied, “Do you have no food in your country that you came here?”

Alexander demurred, “I did not come to see your wealth. I came to see your laws and justice.”

As they were sitting there, two gentlemen came to find justice before the king. The first said, “I bought a derelict building from this man. When I knocked it down I found a treasure. I insisted he take it, as I paid for a building and not a treasure.”

The second man replied, “Master, when I sold that derelict building, I sold it and its entire contents to him.”

The king asked the first, “Do you have a son?” He said, “Yes.”

Then he asked the other, “Do you have a daughter?” He said, “Yes.”

The king said, “Let the boy marry the girl and together they can enjoy the treasure!”

Alexander was astonished. The king asked him, “Why sir? Did I not judge well?” Alexander said, “Yes, you did.” So the king asked, “Had this happened in your country, how would you have judged?”

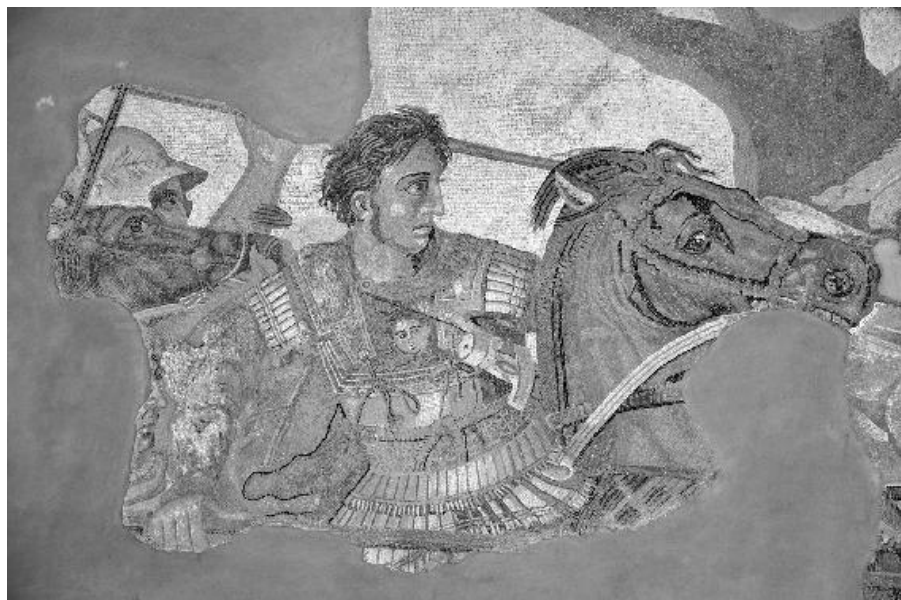
Alexander answered, “I would cut off the head of this one and cut off the head of that one. Then, I’d keep the treasure for the royal household.”

The king asked him, “Sir, does the sun shine on your country?” Alexander said, “Yes.” And so the king asked, “Sir, does rain fall in your country?” Alexander said, “Yes.” The king then asked, “Perhaps you have small grazing animals in your country?” Alexander said, “Yes, why?”

The king said, “This man [viz, Alexander] should drop dead! It is through the merit of those poor animals that the sun shines and the rain falls upon you. Those small animals are your salvation, as it is written, ‘Man and beast do You deliver, O Lord’ (Psalm 36:7). You deliver the men for the sake of their beasts.” (Pesikta DeRav Kahana 9:1)

It’s not very often that a verse of Psalms provides both the setup and the punch line for a joke; but the rabbis admittedly have an odd sense of humor. In the full narrative, they open with Psalm 36:7 about the

pillars of Rome and contrast them with the poor. The bada-boom comes when we learn that it is because of the lowly sheep and goats—animals otherwise reviled for their omnivorous foraging—that Alexander’s kingdom thrives. If it depended upon the vaunted system of Greco-Roman justice, there would be neither a drop of rain nor a ray of sunshine. Alexander may think himself great, but he survives by dint of the little people.



ALEXANDER THE GREAT MOSAIC—NAPLES MUSEUM

Note that the rabbis do not attack Rome directly. Rather, they humorously imagine Alexander as incredulous that people might be generous to one another or that a judge might be anything but rapacious. In truth, rabbinic law also makes it clear that folks are not always as munificent as the people of Afriki (that is, Tunisia). Rather, it is the local king who indicts Alexander for the cravenness of Roman justice, much as the women of Cartagena emasculate Alexander’s pretensions as a conqueror. The rabbis repeat these tales with relish, but they do not directly indict.

Another oft-told rabbinic story recounts the very cusp of Judaism’s (re)invention, in the immediate aftermath of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. This Talmudic tale about the first

rebellion against Rome and the siege of Jerusalem involves three emperors and also confronts the ambiguities of the relationship between rabbinic Judaism and Roman culture.

Our House [the Temple] was destroyed; our Sanctuary was burned; we were exiled from our land. He sent Nero Caesar against them. As he came, Nero shot an arrow to the East; it landed on Jerusalem. To the West; it landed on Jerusalem. To all four points of the compass; it landed on Jerusalem.

Nero asked a child, "Tell me the verse of Scripture you are studying."

The child said, "I will wreak My vengeance upon Edom, through the hand of My people Israel" (Ezek. 25:14).

Nero reasoned, "The Blessed Holy One seeks to destroy His house and then wipe His hands on me."

So he fled and converted to Judaism. His descendant was Rabbi Meir. (Babylonian Talmud Gittin 56a-b)

The story opens with tragedy. The "He" of the narrative is God, using Rome as a scourge against the Jews. Their sin? According to the Talmudic narrative preceding this passage, the sins of the Jews were the twin transgressions of factionalism and baseless hatred of one another. The emperor Nero comes to make war and, as he does, shoots off arrows and quizzes a schoolchild in order to take omens on the eve of battle. All signs point to his conquest of Jerusalem, but there's a catch. Although Nero might win the battle, he will lose the war, as God will then hold him culpable for Jerusalem's destruction and punish him accordingly. The verse of Ezekiel, "I will wreak My vengeance upon Edom," tells us that the rabbis relating this tale see Nero as a stand-in for all of Rome.

The rabbis also understand that the relationship of Rome to Judaism is exemplified by the very omens Nero performs. The first is martial; he shoots arrows. The second is more religiously inclined. He asks a child to recite a verse of Scripture. This might foreshadow Nero's imagined conversion to Judaism. But Nero's method of using a

child's verse as a predictor of things to come is found not only among Jewish texts but also among Christian and, yes, pagan works, too.

The rabbis tell this tale while under Rome's thumb. So the verse about God's vengeance against Rome is presumably aspirational, and Nero is, I suppose, to be credited with a long view of history. It is entirely irrelevant to our narrator that Nero never stepped foot in Palestine—not to mention that he certainly never converted, nor was he the ancestor of a famous rabbi. So what, then, is the point of making claims that are so patently false? The rabbis also take the long view of history. It is as though they say, "Yes, Rome destroyed Jerusalem and God's Temple. But be patient. Ultimately we will conquer them." Why does the Talmud go so far as to imagine that Nero converts and engenders a great rabbi? Is this a subtle recognition that Judaism underwent transformation as a result of Rome's elimination of the Temple cult? It is as much to say that with the Temple gone, Rome itself will help father the new entity represented by the great sage, Rabbi Meir.

Our Talmudic tale continues:

He sent Vespasian Caesar against them. He came and besieged them for three years. . . .

Now the Jews had enough provisions to feed the besieged Jerusalemites for twenty-one years; but among them were thugs who called themselves the "capital guards." The rabbis said to them, "Let us go out and make peace with the Romans." But those thugs did not permit them to do so.

The "capital guards" said, "We will go out and make war upon them." The rabbis said, "The matter will not have support from Heaven." So those "capital guards" arose and burned the storehouses of wheat and barley, and famine ensued.

Now our story has taken a turn toward the historical. Vespasian actually was the general sent to besiege Jerusalem in 66 CE. Alas, the Talmud also accurately represents the internecine fighting among the

various factions within the Jewish community. This sad fact is also attested to by Josephus. The famine that ensued is corroborated by his as well as pagan Roman narratives of the war.

What follows in the rabbis' telling, however, has less to do with history and more to do with how the Jewish community related to Rome in the aftermath of the war. One might even go so far as to say that the rabbis collaborated with Rome and against the Jewish rebels. I must consider the possibility that later rabbis are offering an indictment that places an act of betrayal at the very birth of the rabbinic movement. Revisionist history is never welcome, but I think it is fair to ask whether it was the rabbis or the rebels who cared more for the Jewish community and its future. The nature of the cooperation with Rome does, in any case, define the future of rabbinic Judaism—so this story may not be historically accurate but is otherwise self-defining.

Abba Sikra, the head of the “capital guards” in Jerusalem, was the nephew of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai. Yohanan sent him the message, “Come to me in secret.” When he arrived, Yohanan asked, “How long will you continue doing this, killing everyone with famine?”

He replied, “What can I do? If I say anything to them they will kill *me*!”

Yohanan said, “Let’s see if there is a way for me to leave Jerusalem. It might be possible that I can save a small bit.”

He said, “Pretend you are ill and have everyone come and ask after you. Then put something smelly nearby and have them say that your soul has gone to its rest. Let your disciples enter—and do not let anyone else do it, lest they feel that you are too light—for everyone knows that a living person feels lighter than a corpse.”

We have no historical information regarding Abba Sikra. Some associate his name, Sikra, with a movement of rebels whom Josephus calls *sicarii*, so named for the stilettos (*sicarii* in Latin) they carried. With these daggers they killed their Jewish opponents. The term I

have translated as “capital guards” could as well be translated simply as “thugs.” Thugs, indeed; yet apparently our relatives. The story of escape from a besieged city by playing dead is an old one, found among other Greco-Roman siege accounts. Is it historically accurate? I do not know. Does it tell us that the rabbinic self-perception is one of Judaism that has died and been resurrected? I believe so. The drama of this escape comes with the recognition that the Temple and its cult are over. The afterlife comes when a rabbi encounters an emperor and a new synthesis begins. Of course, death and resurrection are not so easily achieved, so the story still has a few bumps to work out.

Rabbi Eliezer carried him from one side and Rabbi Yehoshua carried him from the other side. When they came to the gate with the “corpse,” the guards sought to stab the body to be sure it was really dead. The disciples protested, “Do you want people to say that you desecrated the body of our master by stabbing him?”

They thought to just shove him. The disciples again protested, “Do you want people to say that you desecrated the body of our master by shoving him?” They relented and opened the gate. They went out.

The bluff worked! It is as though the rabbis said to the Roman besiegers, “Do you really want the media to cover this while you abuse our venerable rabbi’s corpse?” With that the gates open and Rabbi Yohanan was able to carry out his secret mission to General Vespasian.

When Rabbi Yohanan got to the general’s camp, he said, “Peace be upon you O King; peace be upon you, O King!”

Vespasian replied, “You have condemned yourself twice over. First, I am not emperor and you have committed *Lèse majesté* by hailing me as emperor! Further, if I were emperor, what took you so long to come?”

Rabbi Yohanan responded, “As for your saying that you are not emperor, surely you are an emperor, otherwise

Jerusalem would not be given into your hands. . . . And as for your asking why I did not come sooner, those thugs would not permit it.”

Vespasian said, “If you had a barrel of honey with a serpent coiled around it, would you not destroy the barrel to kill the serpent?”

Rabbi Yohanan was silent.

Rabbi Yosef, and some say it was Rabbi Aqiba, recited the verse, “‘It is I, the Lord, Who turns sages back and makes nonsense of their knowledge’ (Isa. 44:25). What he should have said to him was, ‘Take a pair of tongs, remove the serpent, and leave the honey barrel intact.’”

This is a very popular story in rabbinic literature, repeated many times, in many versions. Until fairly recently, historians of the period treated this as an historical narrative. I assuredly do not. But I can report with delight that in one ancient version of the telling, Rabbi Yohanan greets Vespasian with the words (nicely transliterated into Hebrew characters) *Vive Domini Imperator*, exactly how the emperor was saluted in the Roman world. In our Hebrew/Aramaic version the rabbi says, “Shalom.” The point of the story seems to be that when you have escaped a siege and are making a bargain with the enemy (who is about to become your new friend), you are in a “one-down” position. Vespasian has the witty reply while Rabbi Yohanan, in what is surely an unusual moment for any rabbi, is silent. Of course, it doesn’t take very long for rabbis who were not there on the scene to second-guess him and tell him what he should have said.

Vespasian speaks a little Greek in his reply, for the term for *serpent*, for which there are certainly good biblical Hebrew terms (think Eve and the apple), is, instead, *drakon*. That word also supplies our English term *dragon*, but in Greek of the period the word is somewhat less dramatic. Our story continues.

Just then a military attaché [Greek: *paristake*] arrived from Rome and said, “Arise, for Caesar has died and the nobles of Rome wish to seat you at their head.”

Vespasian had just put on one boot; but when he tried to put on the second, it would not go on. So he tried to remove the first boot, but could not. He asked, "What's this?"

Rabbi Yohanan explained, "Don't worry, it's just the good news you've received, as it is said, 'Good tidings fatten the bone' (Prov. 15: 30). What is the remedy? Bring someone whom you are unhappy with and have him pass before you, as it is said, 'Despondency dries up the bones'" (Prov. 17:22).

He did so and his boot went on.

Vespasian said, "I must leave now and will send someone in my stead. But ask of me some favor that I may grant it."

He said, "Give me Yavneh and its sages; and the Gamalielite line; and a physician to heal Rabbi Tzadok."

So much for Vespasian: he's gone from being the witty general to being Little Diddle Dumpling, "one shoe off and one shoe on." Rabbi Yohanan's "prophecy" about Vespasian's ascent to the throne is confirmed. The rabbi is the clever one now, while the new emperor of Rome cannot even get his boots on without a little rabbinic interpretation of Scripture. Presumably this all took place before the invention of the shoehorn.

In classic folk-tale fashion, Rabbi Yohanan gets three wishes. It is through Rome that Yohanan gets the benefits of a place to study and laissez-passer for the Jewish leadership of Gamaliel's family during rebellion. It is intriguing that Yohanan asks favor for his political opponents, the Gamalielite dynasty. That family became the leadership of the Palestinian Jewish community immediately following Rabbi Yohanan's triumph. Gamaliel and his offspring ruled the Jewish community in Roman Palestine into the fourth century. Among his illustrious offspring was Rabbi Judah the Patriarch.

Rabbi Yohanan also asks Vespasian for a doctor to heal Rabbi Tzadok, who had been fasting for forty years to prevent the destruction of Jerusalem. He apparently foresaw the coming horror

through either his political savvy or his prophetic piety. Although Rabbi Tzadok, a priest, ultimately failed in his mission to save the Holy City, he stayed alive and became a model rabbinic disciple.

Rabbi Yohanan's first wish, for the town of Yavneh and its sages, is anachronistic. In fact, when the rabbi met the general, the town was not called Yavneh, but rather Jamnia—it was then the garrison town for the Greek-speaking soldiers of the Roman legions. In other words, Yohanan met Vespasian in the heart of the Roman army encampment and asked for that very town to become the place where he and his disciples could study going forward. Maybe Yohanan needed military protection from the Jewish zealots after sneaking out of Jerusalem and breaking the siege. Only later in rabbinic memory did Jamnia, which the rabbis called “Greek town” after the language the troops spoke (in Hebrew: *Yevvani*), come to be called Yavneh, which in Hebrew means “to build” or, equally possibly, “to understand.” The Roman military center gave way to the place where Judaism was *rebuilt* through *understanding* of Torah. The pun is subtle, but the mythmaking is undeniable. Meanwhile, back in Jerusalem:

Vespasian left and sent Titus.

“And he said, ‘Where is their God, the Rock in Whom they sought refuge?’” (Deut. 32:37). This verse refers to Titus, that evil one, who blasphemed against Heaven.

What did he do? He took a whore by the hand, entered into the Holy of Holies, spread forth a Torah scroll, and committed a transgression upon it. Then he took his sword, penetrated the veil of the Temple, and a miracle occurred and blood spurted forth. Titus thought he had killed God, as it is said, “Your foes roar in the midst of Your meeting place, they place their standards as ensigns” (Psalm 74:4). .

..

What did Titus do? He took the veil of the Temple and used it like a basket [Greek: *girguthani*] in which he put all of the vessels of the Sanctuary. He loaded them on a ship and went to have a triumph in his city of Rome. . . .

A storm arose at sea and threatened to capsize him.

Titus reasoned, “It seems to me that their god only has power upon water. When Pharaoh came, he drowned him in water. When Sisera came, he drowned him in water. Now he wants to drown me in water. If the god of the Jews really has power, let him make war with me upon dry land!”

A voice came forth and said to him, “Evil one, son of an evil one, offspring of the evil Esau. I have a simple creature in My world named a gnat.” *Why is it called “a simple creature?” For it has a mouth but has no rectum.* “Get up on dry land and make war with it!”

When Titus arrived at dry land, a gnat flew up his nose and drilled into his brain for seven years. . . .

When he died they opened his head and that gnat had grown to the size of a dove, two *liters* (Greek) in weight. (Babylonian Talmud Gittin 56a–b)

Titus was Vespasian’s son and became Rome’s emperor after him. His triumph over Jerusalem is commemorated in the (in)famous Arch of Titus in the Roman Forum, depicted below. As can be seen in the picture, Titus really did take the vessels of the Jerusalem Temple back to Rome. But let us look at how the story of Titus is spun by the rabbis. We can assume this is rabbinic fantasy by the simple expedient that much of the action takes place in the Holy of Holies, where no Jew would dare venture. So, they made it all up. Titus is “credited” with transgressing the three cardinal sins of Judaism at one fell swoop: he spills blood, he has forbidden sex, and if we count his sexual blasphemy as an act of sacral prostitution, he commits idolatry. In a medieval telling of this tale (Avot D’Rabbi Nathan 1), Titus smacks the altar with his penis and brays, “*Lykos, Lykos* You consume the flocks of the Jews and give them nothing in return.” Give that storyteller credit for a memorable scene—the vulgar Titus calling God *Lykos*, Greek for a ravenous wolf (think: lycanthropy).



ARCH OF TITUS—ROME

I cannot help but think that the tale of Titus and his whore is inspired by his real-life mistress Berenice. Titus met his girlfriend well before the revolt against Rome. She was the daughter of the Jewish client King Herod Agrippa I and sister to his successor, King Herod Agrippa II—a genuine Jewish princess. Titus was about a decade younger than Berenice, and he successfully wooed her for his own. Poor Berenice. After Titus was elevated to emperor, the Roman courtiers forced him to send her back to her Jewish community in ignominy. You really can't make this stuff up.

Back in our Talmudic tale: when God deigns to seek vengeance for Titus's blasphemies, Titus is at sea. The story imagines how the polytheist thinks. "Well," says Titus, as he dutifully recites a version of Jewish history, "God must be like Neptune, limited in his power only to the seas." It is curious that the rabbis presume the pagan emperor had some knowledge, however fractured, of Jewish history. He mentions Sisera and Pharaoh. According to the Bible, Sisera's chariots were mired in mud when rain swamped him (see Judges 4–5). And Pharaoh and his troops were drowned during the Israelite crossing of the Red Sea (Ex. 14–15). Thus did God defeat Israel's enemies.

In our story, Titus avoids drowning and makes it back to Rome for a

triumphal procession celebrating his and his father's victory over the Jews. God has other plans. Instead of a triumph, God sends Titus a tumor. Here, too, we are in the realm of fantasy. The revenge the Jews imagine for the man who destroyed the Temple is cruel and follows the rabbinic rule of punishment measure for measure. Titus, that a—hole, is destroyed by a creature so lowly it does not even have a rectum. And the gnat/tumor grows to the size of a two-liter dove—exactly what used to be sacrificed to God on the altar that Titus trashed.

There is an undercurrent of irony here. Vespasian and his son, precisely because they put down the rebellion against Rome, are reviled in rabbinic memory, even as there is ambivalence about them. Among the emperors of Rome, Vespasian fared far better in history than the rabbis allow. He became emperor in the long year after Nero's reign, a year referred to by Romans as the year of the four emperors. Between Nero and Vespasian were the emperors Galba, Otho, and Vitellius, none of whom died a natural death. Is it any wonder that the man who controlled the Roman armies ascended to the royal purple? And yet, Vespasian was an old soldier, emphatically not a patrician of the Julio-Claudian emperors' family. He compensated by being the first to endow a chair of learning in Rome—the imperial chair of rhetoric. While others remember him for his contributions to Roman culture, the Jews have a more fraught recollection. In retrospect, I wonder whether Vespasian's endowment of an academic chair helped give rise to the rabbinic notion that he helped found the town of Yavneh, where the rabbis gathered to study Torah after the Temple's destruction.

In 132–135 CE, the Jews again rebelled against Rome, and they recall the depredations of the brutal quashing of the uprising with even more surprising ambiguity. Hadrian, who ruled from 117 to 138 CE, was among the most urbane of Roman emperors. Hipster that he was, Hadrian sported a beard, took a gay lover, and was fluent in Greek. The rabbis recall Hadrian with a certain degree of bemusement. Hadrian visited Roman Palestine in the years before the rebellion. In fact, in 1975, a tourist visiting Israel who was searching for ancient coins accidentally unearthed a bronze statue of him in the Beit Shean valley, in the Roman city of Scythopolis. Readers will not

be surprised to learn that in addition to the nice statue of Hadrian, archeologists discovered a synagogue in the town, complete with its requisite menorah depiction and the word *shalom*.

This did not stop the messianic pretender Bar Kokhba from rebelling. Hadrian's perceived softness may have fed the revolutionaries' resolve to strike against him. In a Midrash on the Song of Songs (2:1:16), a fifth-century rabbi looks back and says simply of Hadrian: "He killed 4,000,000 Jews." By the Middle Ages the number has swollen to imagine Hadrian putting 80,000,000 Jews to death. I do not deny that the death of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of Jews was tragic. Yet I must point out how obviously, even ridiculously, these numbers have been inflated. Hadrian is recalled as having banned many Jewish practices, including Torah study, which was the background to the Rabbi Aqiba martyrdom story I recounted earlier.

Hadrian's having a bronze statue does not reflect much about the attitudes of the Jews toward him. After all, he did build the pagan city of Aelia Capitolina upon the ruins of Jerusalem. Although there is every reason to expect unremitting hatred in rabbinic recounts of Hadrian, where he is standardly referred to as "Hadrian, may his bones be ground to dust," we actually find a much more ambiguous record.

In the fifth-century Midrash on Genesis, the rabbis can imagine:

Hadrian, may his bones be ground to dust, asked Rabbi Yehoshua son of Hanania (an elder contemporary of the emperor), "How did the Blessed Holy One create His world?"

The rabbi replied that God had taken six packets of fire and patted them together with six packets of snow: one for each of the four cardinal directions, one for above and one more for below.

Hadrian replied, "Is that really possible?"

The rabbi brought him into a small room and asked him to stretch out his arms east, west, north, and south. He said, "That's how God did it."

I don't suppose this conversation really took place, despite Hadrian's advent in Roman Palestine at the time this story is set. I am not convinced, either, by the rabbi's pseudo-science. What does impress me, though, is the utterly innocuous nature of the conversation. Instead of being depicted as a murderous tyrant, Hadrian is painted as curious enough about creation to ask a rabbi. The Hadrian depicted in the story is polite, even deferential, to the Creator.

Another Hadrian story tells how he is sympathetic, even kind, to an elderly Jew.

Hadrian, may his bones be ground to dust, was strolling on the pathways of Tiberius when he saw an old man digging and hoeing. Hadrian said to him, "Grandpa, grandpa! Had you worked early you wouldn't need to be working so late!"

The old man replied, "I worked early and I work late [in my life]. I do what pleases my Master in Heaven."

Hadrian said, "By your life, old man, how old are you today?"

He said, "I am one hundred years old."

Hadrian replied, "You are one hundred and still digging and hoeing?! Do you think you will be able to eat the fruits of your labor?"

The old man said, "If I merit, I shall eat. And if not, just as my ancestors labored for me, so I labor for my offspring."

Hadrian said, "By your life, if you merit eating the fruits of the tree you are planting, let me know."

After much time, the tree bore figs. The old man said, "The time has come to tell the Emperor."

What did he do? He filled a wheelbarrow [Greek: *kartella*] with figs and went to the gate of the palace. The guards asked, "What is your business?"

He said, "To appear before the Emperor."

When he entered Hadrian asked, "What is your business?"

He replied, "I am the old man who was digging and hoeing. You said if I merited to eat the fruit of those trees I should let you know. Now I have done so, and these are those figs."

Hadrian declared, "I command [Greek: *keleuin*] to bring forth a golden divan [Greek: *sellion*] to seat him. I further command that you empty the wheelbarrow of figs and replace it with dinars."

His courtiers asked him, "Would you give such honor to this old Jew?"

Hadrian replied, "His Creator honors him; shall I not also do so?" (Lev. Rabbah 25:5)

This story is a favorite folktale that revolves around the touching line the old man utters, "Just as my ancestors labored for me, so I labor for my offspring." Its sentiment of planting for those who come after is so lovely that it was used by a national Jewish charity for its fund-raising campaign. Indeed, in many versions of the story, it is a mere passerby who asks the old man the question that invites his memorable response. The story uses a well-known Greco-Roman rhetorical form, a *chreia* in Greek (more on that later).



HADRIAN EQUESTRIAN STATUE—CAPITOLINE MUSEUMS, ROME

In our otherwise Aramaic version of the tale, when Hadrian says, “I command,” he does so in Greek, transliterated into Hebrew letters. When the old man is seated on a divan, again we have a Greek term, which is why I used the loanword “divan” for my translation. When Hadrian’s courtiers mildly object to his showing honor to a Jew, Hadrian rebukes them, complimenting God along with the elderly Jew. This is hardly the portrait of a bloodthirsty tyrant. The rabbis’ ambivalence about Hadrian is readily apparent. Rome may have brutally put down a rebellion against it; but the empire, embodied in the emperor, apparently has its good points, too.

When Hadrian visited Roman Palestine in 130 CE, he met with his provincial governor, Tinius Rufus. Rufus was known to the Jews of the Land of Israel. It was he who was charged with brutally putting down the Bar Kokhba rebellion in the years 132–135. So it is curious to find that rabbinic literature records imaginary conversations between

Rufus and the legendary Rabbi Aqiba, who may have supported the rebellion. Among these pieces of rabbinic performance is one about the mythical Sabbath River, Sambatyon:

The evil Tyrannis Rufus asked Rabbi Aqiba, “What is today [the Sabbath] of all days?”

He replied, “What are you among all men?”

Rufus asked, “What did I say to you and what did you say to me!?”

Aqiba explained, “You asked how the Sabbath is distinguished from the other days; while I asked how Rufus is distinguished among all men.”

Rufus replied, “The Emperor has honored me!”

Aqiba noted, “So, too, the Blessed Holy One has honored the Sabbath.”

Rufus asked, “How can you prove this to me?”

Aqiba said, “The River Sambatyon proves it, as it flows all week long, but rests on Shabbat.”

Rufus said, “Are you kidding me?!”

Rabbi Aqiba said, “Well then, let the necromancer prove it. He can bring up the dead all week long, but not on Shabbat.”

Rufus went and checked by raising his father from the dead. He rose all week long, but not on Shabbat. Rufus asked him, “Dad, since you died, you’ve converted to Judaism?! Why won’t you rise on Saturday?”

His father told him, “Whoever may not observe the Sabbath among the living surely embraces it here . . . for all week long we are tortured, but on Shabbat we are allowed respite.” (Gen. Rabba 11:5)

This is a lovely rabbinic parody. Even the most credulous believer in the veracity of rabbinic accounts would probably draw the line at ghost stories. And watch how the rabbis tweak Rufus by punning on his “first name” and calling him *tyrannis* (tyrant) instead of Tinius. Rufus and Rabbi Aqiba have an exchange in which they first speak

past one another (an intriguing metaphor for rabbis and Roman culture), but eventually Rufus is set straight that Aqiba is answering his question about Shabbat. When Rufus presses Aqiba for proof, he resorts to natural science: the River Sambatyon. The Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder reported on such a “Sabbath” river in his *Natural History* (xxxii:24). When that’s not sufficient proof, Aqiba appeals to supernatural science, as it were, and raises Rufus’s father from hell. We are not meant to overlook the insult delivered with the assumption that Rufus’s father is being tortured in Hades, even if Rufus is oblivious. But the joke is still on him, as his father welcomes in the Sabbath with relief and delight—just like the Jews do. This hearkens back to the report about Nero’s converting. Rabbinic storytellers like the idea of pagans becoming Jewish as a sign of ultimate victory.

All that said, I once again must attend to tone. While other rabbinic texts make Rufus out to be Aqiba’s tormentor, here he is presented as simply outwitted in dialogue. The tale does not disguise the pleasure with which the fifth-century editor of *Genesis Rabbah* includes a tale about Shabbat that mocks Rufus and his family. But aside from a snarky narrative, it is not really very damning of the Roman governor who so brutally put down a Jewish rebellion.

The emperors who visited Roman Palestine often come in for this kind of mocking. Diocletian was emperor from 284 to 305. Early in his reign, in ca. 286 CE, Diocletian visited the city of Tiberias, in Roman Palestine. The Jerusalem Talmud (Terumot 8:10, 46b) reports that the disciples of Rabbi Judah II suggested that before he was emperor, he was a swineherd. This is a clever shot at the emperor, as his plebeian origins were impugned by association with the emphatically not-kosher and, let’s face it, filthy pig. In a fifth-century commentary on Leviticus, the rabbis say of Rome:

Why is it likened to a pig? To tell you that just like the pig, when it wallows in filth, puts forth its feet [thus showing its split hooves] as though to claim it is a pure and kosher animal; so too this evil empire is arrogantly violent and steals, yet tries to appear as though they have justice by holding a tribunal [Greek: *bema*]. (Lev. Rabbah 13:5)

The sting of the story comes when the word they use is the same Greek term the Romans use for their tribunals (*bema*). The messages the rabbis deliver on Rome are decidedly mixed.

But then, there was the emperor Antoninus. He seemingly could do no wrong. There is neither ambiguity nor ambivalence; the Rabbis ♥ Antoninus. The trouble is, we cannot be sure exactly who this Emperor Antoninus actually was. There were seven emperors of the so-called Antonine imperial line, of whom five were called “the good emperors.” Of those, we can eliminate Nerva and Trajan as far too early.

We can also drop Hadrian (may his bones be ground to dust) from the list of possibilities. We are left with two really viable candidates: they are Antoninus Pius, who ruled from 138 to 161 CE, and Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, who ruled from 161 to 180. I prefer Marcus Aurelius, not only because he was a Stoic philosopher who left twelve books of *Meditations* in Greek, but also because his years in office line up better with his rabbinic buddy, Rabbi Judah, Patriarch of the Jews of Palestine. Judah, who is affectionately called Rebbi by his colleagues, published his Mishnah around 200 CE. So he would have been a much younger contemporary of Marcus Aurelius. Despite the lack of historical accuracy, rabbinic literature is replete with tales of the great “bromance” between Antoninus and Rebbi.

The Babylonian Talmud looks back upon the two of them with great nostalgia and with none of the venom it usually reserves for Rome. It imagines Antoninus seeking political advice from Rabbi Judah:

Antoninus asked Rebbi, “I want to have my son Severus rule as Emperor after me and I want to declare the city of Tiberias an imperial colony [*colonia*]. If I ask for one they will grant me that, but if I ask for two they will not.”

Rebbi brought a fellow and had a second man ride on his shoulders. He gave a dove to the one on top and told the one below, “Tell your fellow to release the dove.”

Antoninus inferred from this that he should appoint Severus; and once he was emperor then he could make

Tiberias an imperial colony. (Babylonian Talmud Avodah Zarah 10a)

We can only admire Rebbi's cagey advice. Without committing himself verbally, he acts out in mum-show what Antoninus needs to do to have his way. What is curious about the tale is that Marcus Aurelius had no son named Severus. In fact, none of the emperors mentioned just above had such a son. But Septimius Severus reigned as emperor from 193 to 211, so he would be an excellent candidate to be the son of Rebbi's "best friend forever." The years don't all quite match up, but the choice of Severus offers historical plausibility for the story. Rebbi has yet more advice.

Antoninus complained that the grandees of Rome were opposing him. Rebbi took him to a garden where he plucked a radish. Day after day he did this. Antoninus inferred that he should kill off his enemies one by one, rather than attack them all at once. (ibid.)

The Talmud then goes even further in its flight of the imagination about their relationship:

Every day Antoninus would wait upon Rebbi; serving him food and drink. When Rebbi wanted to go to bed, Antoninus would bend down and say, "Climb upon me up to your bed."

Rebbi protested, "It is not appropriate to treat the emperor so disrespectfully."

Antoninus replied: "Would that I could be the mat beneath your seat in the World to Come!" (Babylonian Talmud Avodah Zarah 10b)

In Roman Palestine the rabbis never went quite this far. Instead, they imagine the emperor engaging Rebbi in more appropriate philosophical discourse. So, for example,

Antoninus asked our holy Rabbi, “At the time when a person dies and the body has decayed, will the Blessed Holy One resurrect that person for judgment?”

He replied, “While you are asking me about the body, which is impure, ask me also about the soul, which is pure.” (Mekilta D’Rabbi Ishmael Shirta 2)

That’s a nice conversation for a Stoic philosopher king to have with our holy rabbi. In fact, the rabbinic analogy to body and soul is a famous tale about how a blind and a lame watchman collaborate. This story of cooperation between blind and lame is also found in the classical Greek Anthology, a tenth-century collection of ancient Hellenistic literature. The story also is found in the earliest rabbinic commentary on Exodus, compiled in Roman Palestine during the generation immediately following that of Rebbi and Antoninus.

Note that Rebbi is called here “our holy Rabbi.” The Palestinian Talmud tells a tale about Antoninus and Rebbi that explains why, while at the same time elevating Antoninus to almost otherworldly stature.

There are indications that Antoninus converted to Judaism; and there are indications that Antoninus did not convert:

They saw him on Yom Kippur with a broken shoe [observing the rabbinic prohibition against leather footwear on the holiday].

But even the “Heaven-fearers” do this. . . .

When Antoninus heard the verse “No uncircumcised person may eat of [the Paschal lamb]” (Ex. 12:48), he went and was circumcised. He went to Rebbi and said to him, “Rebbi, look at my circumcision!”

Rebbi demurred, saying, “I have never looked at my own circumcision, now I should look at yours?!”

Why was he called “our holy Rabbi?” Because he never looked at his circumcision in his life. . . .

Rabbi Abbahu quoted Rabbi Lazar, “If the [God-fearers] are counted as righteous converts in the Messianic Future,

Antoninus will be at the head of the line!” (Jerusalem Talmud Megillah 1:11 72b)

I have to wonder whether Rebbi really got his nickname by never looking down! And while I am snickering about that story, I should add that it is highly doubtful that an emperor called Antoninus converted to Judaism. It is not even likely that there was a Roman emperor who could qualify as a “Heaven-fearer.” To refresh our memory, there was an inscription at Aphrodisias in Asia Minor that listed the names of “God fearers.” It is likely that they were donors to the synagogue of some sort and that the two terms are synonymous. Maybe they were also sympathetic to Judaism—fellow-travelers, if you will. It is said that Nero’s wife Agrippina also was keen on Jewish customs; but we cannot really know. Still, how likely is this designation for a Roman emperor? We offer one more Talmudic text that might put this discussion in perspective.

Just a couple of folios after the story we just saw from the Jerusalem Talmud, we read:

Antoninus made a Menorah for the synagogue. Rebbi heard about it and said, “Blessed is God who put it in his heart to make a Menorah for the synagogue.” (Jerusalem Talmud Megillah 3:2 74a)

This report, I think, should not be discounted. The quintessential symbol of Judaism in the Roman world, menorahs were truly ubiquitous in synagogues. Synagogues from east to west had actual menorahs, bas reliefs, and frescoes of menorahs. We have even seen that a certain Socrates “made” a menorah. It could be that he, too, was a Gentile who made a dedicatory offering. Or, he could have been a Jew with a particularly Gentile-sounding name. Either way, when we combine the Talmudic report about Antoninus with the donor listings at Aphrodisias, we understand why some thought that the emperor was a “God-fearer.” This no doubt gave rise to later confusion, because in rabbinic literature the term refers to semi-converts, or those who take up Jewish religious practices.

I am not particularly concerned with the historical reality regarding whether an emperor made a donation of a menorah, or wore broken sandals on Yom Kippur, or even flashed Rabbi Judah the Patriarch. What is of interest to me here is the ease with which the rabbis retail these stories with nary an objection that a Roman emperor could have affinities for Judaism and devotion to our holy Rabbi. Part of this is, of course, attributable to Jewish chauvinism. “Whom among us does not love Jews?” they seem to say. But there has been a shift in the rhetoric about the emperors who symbolize Rome that may be attributable to the passage of time. During the rebellions against the empire and their aftermaths, rabbis told stories that were negative or, perhaps, neutral. They indulged in parody and put-down. But two generations following Bar Kokhba, by the turn of the third century, when the Pax Romana reached even Palestine, and with Judah, the popular Jewish patriarch, having good relations with Rome, the tone shifted toward the positive. It seems that after many years, Jacob/Israel reconciled with his martial brother Esau/Edom, who was Rome.

In the Roman Empire of that period, the Second Sophistic flourished. It was a movement that celebrated Greek education and literature and had a strong impact on the East, where Greek remained the lingua franca. The rabbis recognized that Roman instruction held some distinct benefits for them and for their movement. They increasingly adopted Roman traditions—in particular, Roman rhetoric. An education in rhetoric was the key to advancement in the Roman Empire. The Jews embraced a rhetorical education then as they have embraced education ever since to open the doors to success in the broader world.

Rabbis Learn the Three Rs: Reading, Writing, and Roman Rhetoric

There's an old joke about the comedians' convention that took place in the Catskills back in the 1950s. All the great stand-up artists were there, eating their way to heart attacks, so long as they didn't "die" on stage. Every night a different comic would provide dinner entertainment while his colleagues *fressed*. They'd sidle up to the microphone and snap off a series of numbers, such as "seventeen, six, forty-two, twenty." Mouths full to overflowing, the house roared their appreciation. A newcomer watched the scene with confusion. "I don't get it," he said to his buddy. "These guys recite a list of numbers and everybody laughs. What? Are they all playing the numbers?"

His more experienced colleague explained, "Naw, but these guys come here every year and they've heard every joke in the book. To save time, each joke has its own number. When they hear a stand-up comic run the numbers, they all remember the jokes and laugh. That's it."

The newcomer was astonished and determined to have his turn at the microphone. He trotted on stage and practically crooned into the mic: "Two, seven, nine, forty-four." The house was absolutely silent. Panicked, he tried again, "Six, fourteen, fifty-seven, three." The audience began booing. He left the stage before they started throwing things.

"OK, I still don't get it. The first guy said a bunch of numbers and

they laughed their *tuchesses* off. I get up there and die on stage. What's the difference?"

His friend patiently explained, "It's how you tell it."

This could as easily be a joke about ancient Rome as the Catskills. In antiquity, everyone who was anyone learned rhetoric. That means that everyone knew the same set of anecdotes and stories about characters from Roman history. Everyone could trot out a well-known bon mot. What made you a successful rhetor in the Roman world was how you'd tell it.

This type of Greek education had a significant place within the Jewish community. In the Roman East, rhetoric depended on knowledge of Greek language and the Greek classics. Those legends were the source of the rhetorical equivalent of Borscht-belt jokes and stories. So it is surprising to read an early rabbinic text listing Greek—and, as we will see, Greek rhetoric—among the things Jews disdained after the three disastrous wars with Rome between 65 and 135 CE. It's from the Mishnah, that compendium of Jewish laws compiled by Rabbi Judah the Patriarch in approximately 200 CE. Rabbi Judah is looking back upon Jewish reactions to these so-called wars, referred to by the Greek loanword *polemus* (think: polemics).

During the war [*polemus*] of Vespasian they decreed a prohibition against grooms wearing wedding crowns and against using the tambourine.

During the war of [the provincial governor, General Lusius] Quietus (the so-called War of the Diaspora) they decreed a prohibition against bridal crowns and that a man should not teach his son Greek.

During the last war (the Bar Kokhba rebellion against Hadrian) they decreed a prohibition that brides no longer be carried through the city on a palanquin; but our rabbis permitted a bride to be carried through the city on a palanquin. (m. Sotah 9:17, following the text of the Cambridge manuscript)

I do not wish to minimize the damage inflicted by Rome upon the Jewish people in these military engagements: thousands were killed and exiled from their homes. Jews were banned from Jerusalem. The Jewish community was essentially helpless to respond in any significant way. This is what their reaction looked like seventy years after the final of those battles: Jews “got even” with Rome by not using tambourines! No more bridal crowns! Really? And *fuggidabout* riding on a palanquin. Of course the rabbis, those good guys, they really knew how to make a girl happy. They rescinded that prohibition and permitted brides to ride palanquins. Who was it in the Jewish community, referred to as “they,” who did the forbidding until “our rabbis” came along and said the equivalent of, “Oh let the poor girl have a happy wedding day. After all, haven’t we suffered enough?” I have no idea who “they” are. I am suspicious that the rabbis of this Mishnah have set up a straw man intent on prohibiting things, so that our dear rabbis can come along and once more permit them. Yay rabbis!

A palanquin is the equivalent of those open-top stretch limos from which prom goers wave their arms and torsos, all the while snapping selfies. The scandalized Jewish community of Late Antiquity apparently prohibited palanquins in the aftermath of all that death and destruction. Who knows, it could lead to mixed dancing or some other horrific form of levity. The response seems so feeble it’s risible. It’s as though modern Jews decided to forbid wedding caterers to serve mini-frankfurters to punish Germany for World War II. So there!

My jaundiced reading of this text is pertinent here because of the line almost hidden away in the middle section of the Mishnah, right after the business about bridal crowns: “that a man should not teach his son Greek.” Oh? Did “they” really prohibit teaching Greek? How then might the eager Jewish young urban professionals find a leg up in the Roman East? Greek was essential for their career advancement. Learning Greek for the Jews of the Roman Empire was functionally equivalent to learning English for immigrants to America.

The same tractate of the Babylonian Talmud where the problematic Mishnah we just read is found also records a countertradition (Sotah 49b) attributed to Rebbi’s father that says,

There were a thousand students in my father's house, five hundred of whom learned Torah and five hundred of whom learned Greek wisdom.

A few words later, the Talmud qualifies this tradition by commenting that “the house of Rabban Gamaliel is different, because they had close relations with the [Roman] imperial government.” Within rabbinic culture there was a pecking order among the members of the so-called rabbinic class of Palestine by political and socioeconomic criteria. Those who were wealthier were generally more acculturated to Greco-Roman society. Those who held political office were, of necessity, engaged in Roman politics and Greek and Latin culture. The more urbanized classes of Jews—and these surely included a significant proportion, likely the majority, of the rabbis—were more likely to see themselves as citizens of the Roman Empire and behave accordingly. What exactly did those yuppie students learn in the patriarch's house or school? The Greek wisdom referred to, in fact, meant Roman rhetoric. The rabbis and other Jews of Roman Palestine were given the basic grammar and rhetorical education that would be expected of any functionally literate citizen of the empire.

Libanius was the most famous teacher of rhetoric (after Aristotle, of course). He lived in the fourth century CE in Antioch, on the River Orontes, in what is today eastern Turkey. Libanius held forth at his school of rhetoric during the heyday of rabbinic Judaism that unfolded in the Galilee, just to his south. Among his students over the years, Libanius could count hundreds of pagans and even some Christians who would grow up to become bishops of the church. We briefly met Libanius on our quick tour of Antioch. There, I pointed out that among his few Jewish students was the son of the Jewish patriarch of Palestine, who was either Rabbi's grandson or great-grandson. Rhetoric was what one needed to learn if one was to advance in the world. Much as parents try to send their kids to Ivy League schools today, those who were ambitious to advance them in the bureaucracy of the Roman world sent their children to study rhetoric with Libanius.

In Antioch they learned the basics: grammar, reading and writing, fluency in Greek, and the ability to quote the works of Homer and the

other Greco-Roman classics by memory. This education was a *sine qua non* for anyone who wanted to work in imperial offices or as an attorney. Students studied with Libanius from one to three years, some perhaps as long as five or six years. Above all, they were trained to be sophists: young men who could speak extemporaneously, holding their audiences spellbound. They employed their skills in legal forensics; that is, interpreting and, even more importantly, arguing the law on behalf of clients. The most basic tool of their education was their ability to produce the appropriate exemplary story at the right moment and to tell it in a fresh way, at length or briefly, as their case required. “Six, fourteen, fifty-seven, three.” See? Now it’s funny!

These anecdotes (in Greek: *chreia*) are often called “pronouncement stories,” as the main character says something memorable. They constituted the basic repertoire of every student schooled in rhetoric. We know this from ancient rhetorical texts. Students’ rhetorical practice slates have survived in many places across the Mediterranean basin, including its eastern shores. These student copybooks conform to the formal training manuals that also survive. Teaching rhetoric was an art honed for almost a thousand years. All the evidence teaches us the importance of the *chreia*.

The anecdote we recounted in chapter three about Alexander the Great in Cartagena qualifies as a *chreia*, as it ends with the pronouncement, “I, Alexander of Macedon, was a foolish king until I came to Cartagena and learned sound counsel from its women.” Here’s a *chreia* about Alexander the Great from Libanius’s textbook for his students: “Alexander, upon being asked by someone where he kept his treasures, pointed to his friends.” Maybe that’s why they called him “the Great.” In Libanius’s still-existent textbook, the rhetorical exercise is given, and then he demonstrates how to tell it first briefly, then in paraphrase, then as demonstration of a cause, in a comparison, as an example for others, as testimony from ancient authority, and, finally as a brief epilogue. The training in rhetoric was painstaking and thorough.

Another short example of a *chreia* comes from Libanius’s personal correspondence. He sent a letter to his relative Aristaenetus in the year 393 CE, hand-delivered by one of his students. The letter opens, “The bearer is both Pelagius’s son and mine; for the former begat him,

while I taught him to love rhetoric.” This saying is striking, as it makes the teacher a second father to his pupil. I compare it to a Mishnah (ca. 200 CE) that teaches, “His father brought him into this world, while his rabbi, who taught him wisdom, brings him to the world to come.” In this rabbinic encomium, the rabbi is even more important than the father; for it is the rabbi who teaches wisdom or Torah, and so brings him salvation.

Around the same time as the Mishnah, early in the third century CE, a Greek philosopher named Diogenes Laertius quoted Aristotle (fourth century BCE): “Teachers who educated children deserved, he said, more honor than parents who merely gave them birth; for bare life is furnished by the one, while the other ensures a *good* life.” Libanius was borrowing his rhetorical trope from Diogenes Laertius and not the Mishnah. Yet the Mishnah’s rhetorical elevation of the teacher is exactly the same as that attributed to Aristotle.

Diogenes Laertius also tells us the tale of an earlier Diogenes, this one a founder of cynic philosophy, who lived at the same time as Aristotle. Among Diogenes the Cynic’s observations, we are told the following *chreia*:

When visiting Megara, Diogenes looked at their sheep, whose valuable wool was protected by leather jackets; yet the Megarans’ children ran around naked. Diogenes remarked, “It is better to be a Megaran’s lamb than his son.”

This *chreia* has three notable points. First, in the story Diogenes is a foreigner, who has come from afar to comment upon what he sees. Second, he has a witty remark about the folks he sees. Finally, there are those crazy sheep dressed in leather vests.



STUDENT BEARING LETTER—ARCHEOLOGICAL MUSEUM OF MILAN

Forty-five years ago the scholar Henry Fischel pointed out that these three motifs also can be found in a story about the renowned Jewish sage Hillel:

This law was forgotten by the elders of Betayra. Once upon a time the 14th of Nissan (when the paschal sacrifice takes place) fell on Shabbat and they did not know whether the performance of the paschal sacrifice overrode Sabbath prohibitions or not. They said, “There is a Babylonian named Hillel who served his teachers Shammaya and Avtalyon. He may know whether the paschal sacrifice overrides Sabbath prohibitions or not. Perhaps he will be of help” . . .

They asked him, “What shall we do, for people have not brought their knives with them to perform the sacrifice (and are forbidden from carrying them on Shabbat)?”

He said to them, “I heard this law but I have forgotten it. *But leave it to the Jews; if they are not prophets, they are*

the children of prophets.”

Indeed, everyone whose paschal offering was a sheep tucked the knife into its wool and everyone whose paschal offering was a goat tied his knife between the goat's horns. That way the paschal offerings carried the knives themselves. When Hillel saw this he remembered the law and said, “This is what I heard from Shammaya and Avtalyon.” (Palestinian Talmud Pesahim 6:1, 33a)

This very Jewish telling of the *chreia* is set in the first century, when the Temple still stood and the Jews were bringing their Passover sacrifices. A legal ruling is called for, and Hillel the Babylonian is consulted and makes a pronouncement about what he sees. He memorably plays on the words of the prophet Amos—a sheep breeder—who said, “I am not a prophet, nor am I the son of a prophet” (Amos 7:14). So we have a foreigner who comments wittily about the people he observes, while the sheep cavort. This is an impressive rabbinic retelling of an ancient *chreia*.

The rabbis had their own cycles of *chreia*, as well. Hillel is a popular character in many of the *chreia* of the rabbis. In the Midrash we read,

Hillel was once walking with his disciples. When he went to take leave they asked him, “Master, where are you going?”

Hillel replied, “I am going to do a kindness for the guest in my home.”

They asked, “Do you have guests every day?”

Hillel said, “Is not my lonely soul a guest in my body? For one day it is here and on the morrow it departs.” (Lev. Rabbah 34:3)

One of the most famous of all rabbinic stories is a *chreia* involving Hillel:

Once a gentile came to Shammai and said, “Convert me on

the condition that you teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one foot.” Shammai pushed him away with the builder’s cubit that he was holding.

He came to Hillel who converted him, saying, “What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow. This is the entire Torah. The rest is commentary. Go, study.” (Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31a)

This tale is one of a series of Hillel anecdotes collected on the Talmudic folio just quoted. In each, Shammai the Elder plays the curmudgeon, a foil to the warm embrace of Hillel. The punch line of this particular *chreia* is the negative form of the Golden Rule—a platitude that was omnipresent in the Greco-Roman world, attributed to Seneca (a contemporary of Hillel) and to Jesus (another contemporary of Hillel), among others. I love the way the story makes the Golden Rule so rabbinic-sounding by insisting that there must also be commentary and that the newly minted convert now must go study. All of these details are predictable, especially in an academic setting. What seems unique to our tale is the clever challenge, “while I stand on one foot.” Yet even this is a Greco-Roman commonplace. In the first century, the Greek essayist Plutarch (Sayings of the Spartans #18) reports this *chreia*:

A man who was visiting Sparta stood for a long time upon one foot, and said to a Spartan, “I do not think that you, sir, could stand upon one foot as long as that.”

The Spartan interrupted and said, “No, but there isn’t a goose that couldn’t do that.”

I suppose we should be grateful that the rabbis’ version of the *chreia* resisted imagining a goose standing on one foot on its way to being sacrificed in the Jerusalem Temple as a side dish for the paschal lamb. The *chreia* form we are dealing with is quintessentially Greco-Roman, as clear a staple of Greco-Roman culture as talking baseball would be among American males. The only difference with the rabbis’ examples is local color and Jewish law. In fact, if you think about it, the joke

about the Jewish comedians in the Catskills is also a *chreia*.

One of the longest-running performances of Roman culture is found in a type of Greco-Roman literature called the symposium. Literally, the *sym-posium* is a cocktail party. *Sym* is Greek for “together,” as in sym-path^y (having fellow feeling). *Posium* is from the Greek word meaning “to drink.” It is related to the English word *potable*. So a symposium is a cocktail party, specifically a literary cocktail party. I have no doubt that cocktail parties were regularly held in the ancient world, just as they are today. But the symposium is a cocktail party where the chatter is decidedly bookish. Maybe we can still find parties like that near Columbia or Harvard. But in the Roman world, the point was to write a story about a bunch of famous people at a cocktail party. Whether or not they were actually there is not important. The point was to show them drinking a few cups of wine, nibbling crudité^s, and all the while cleverly quoting the classics. Indeed, it would be fair to refer to the symposium as a literary genre, which dates as early as Plato’s *Symposium* in the fourth century BCE, all the way to Macrobius’s *Saturnalia* in the early fifth century CE—contemporary with the Jerusalem Talmud. For 750 years, Greeks and Romans reveled in the literature presumably quoted, the speeches supposedly made, the drinks quaffed, and the scandals whispered during the symposia.

The recipe for a successful symposium starts, of course, with wine. At least three cups, preferably more, and ideally you would need between three and five famous guests. Macrobius describes a symposium at which he imagined all the guests drinking together, even though some were already long dead. They eat hors d’œuvres, which they dip into a briny sauce. Their appetite is whetted by sharp vegetables, radishes, or romaine lettuce. The Greek word for these veggies is *karpos*. Each food is used as a prompt to dig through one’s memory to find apposite bookish quotes about it. The writer Athenaeus (who was actually born in Egypt and lived in Rome, his name notwithstanding) cites two hundred works of literature, many long lost to us except by his mention of their having been quoted during his long cocktail party. Above all, guests at a symposium love to quote Homer, the divine Homer. Quoting his work was, to them, like a Baptist preacher quoting the Bible or an English major spouting

Shakespeare. It showed you were well schooled.

As the main course was brought in on platters, more wine was mixed with water. Civilized Romans considered it uncouth to drink their wine neat. Instead, they added a good splash of water, warm if the wine needed a little help in bringing out its bouquet. If you were fancy, you served the wine over ice or snow, not an easy thing to have on hand in Late Antiquity. Think of the snow cone as the epitome of classiness. If the wine was wretched, well, they added sugar (now think of Manischewitz). Alcohol in antiquity was limited to wine or beer—no one figured out how to distill hard alcohol until the high Middle Ages. To kick off a symposium, a libation was poured to Bacchus. Then the dinner guests took their places reclining on pillows, leaning on their left arms, and using their right hands to eat. Of course, they washed their fingers before eating their Mediterranean flatbreads, scooping up meats and poultry—no forks back then.

Athenaeus records a debate about dessert, a sweet paste of fruit, wine, and spices. Many think it a nice digestive, but Athenaeus quotes Heracleides of Tarentum, who argues that such a lovely dish ought to be the appetizer, eaten at the outset of the meal. After the sumptuous meal and the endless quotation of texts (recalled by mnemonic devices), the symposium diners sang their hymns of thanksgiving to the gods. Then, the burlesque show began. Scantly clad women called “flute girls” did what they did best (hint: it did not actually involve wind instruments), while vaudevillians worked the room for vulgar laughs. The signal for the descent into debauchery was intoned in Greek: *api komias*—to the comedians!

All of this should seem suspiciously familiar to anyone who has ever attended a Passover Seder. The traditional Seder begins with a cup of wine, and blessings to God are intoned. Then hands are washed in preparation for eating the dipped vegetables, called *karpos*, the Greek word faithfully transliterated into Hebrew in the Passover Haggadah. Like the symposiasts, Jews dip in brine. The traditional Haggadah recalls who was there at the earliest Seders: Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, Rabbi Aqiba, and Rabbi Tarphon (a Hebraized version of the Greek name Tryphon). The conversation is prompted by noting the foods that are served and by asking questions whose answers quote sacred Scripture.

There is more. Traditionally the Passover banquet is eaten leaning on the left side, on pillows. Appetites are whetted by bitter herbs and then sweetened by the pastelike Haroset (following the opinion of Heracleides of Tarentum?). Seder participants even scoop up food in flatbread. Following the Passover meal there are hymns to God.

But the rabbis drew the line at vaudeville: no flute girls, no comedians. Indeed, the Mishnah instructs, “We do not end the meal after eating the paschal lamb by departing *api komias*.” That final phrase, thanks to the Talmud of Jewish Babylonia, where they did not know Greek, has come to be Hebraized as “*afi-komen*,” the hidden piece of matzo eaten for dessert. But in Roman Palestinian they define the term quite accurately: “*Api komias* refers to comedians.” As long ago as 1957, Siegfried Stein wrote the authoritative “The Influence of Symposia Literature on the Literary Form of the Pesah Haggadah.” It seems that the reason this night is different from all other nights is that the rabbis adopted the structure of the Greco-Roman symposium banquet for the Jewish feast of freedom, perhaps at the end of the first century CE.

This quoting of texts and placing books at the center of the rabbinic enterprise is a reflection of the Greco-Roman culture in which the rabbis lived. In the Passover Seder, the rabbis frequently quoted from the Bible. Furthermore, the ways in which they selectively quoted and interpreted set the course for their readings of Scripture for centuries to come. The elucidations that the rabbis offered for Scripture employ the same methods of interpretation that the Alexandrian Greeks did when they read Homer and, later, as the Sophists did in construing Greco-Roman law using those rules of understanding. I have already quoted from Libanius’s textbook teaching his students how to be effective lawyers and orators by using a *chreia*. The rabbis employed the same skill set to advocate for Jewish law and sway the hearts and minds of the Jews toward their interpretations of the Torah and Judaism.

My teacher Professor Saul Lieberman wrote back in the 1940s and ’50s about the rabbis’ regular use of Greco-Roman interpretive strategies in their Midrash (Scriptural interpretation). He lists a broad range of Greek terms and styles that the rabbis shared. In some instances Professor Lieberman even suggests that the rabbis adopted

these methods directly from the Greeks and Romans. When the Alexandrians read Homer and were stumped by a difficult term, they often used another verse of the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* to unlock the opaque first verse. Lieberman calls this interpreting Scripture by Scripture. There is a lovely example in the Passover Haggadah that aptly illustrates the method.

There is a difficult phrase in Deuteronomy 26:5, which is the beginning of the story of the Exodus in the Passover ritual. In English we tend to translate the verse so that it makes sense: “We went down to Egypt . . . *few in number*.” But the Hebrew text, *b’metai m’at*, is obscure and difficult. The word for “few” is: *m’at*. The other Hebrew word in the phrase, *b’metai*, assuredly does not mean “in number,” no matter how well it works in English. I lean toward translating the entire phrase more accurately, as “mortals few,” guessing the word *b’metai* shares the Hebrew root *met*, which means “corpse.” My translation of Deuteronomy 26:5 would read, “We went down to Egypt . . . *mortals few*.”

So how does the Haggadah interpret Scripture by Scripture? It pairs Deuteronomy 26:5 with Deuteronomy 10:22, “with seventy persons (*nefesh*) did your ancestors descend to Egypt.” The explanation of the difficult term comes in the juxtaposition itself. The word “few” in Deuteronomy 26:5 is presumed to be equivalent to “seventy” of the other verse. The latter verse’s word “persons” then defines the difficult term *b’metai*, which is why I translated it as “mortals.”

For the Greeks, another way of “solving” difficult passages of Homer was to use that most Alexandrian of interpretive techniques: allegory. In allegory, the interpreter is essentially saying, “this means that.” When my high school teacher explained Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*, she pointed out that the old fisherman Santiago is allegorically understood as a Christ figure. His hands bleed, he carries the mast as Jesus carried his cross, and so on. We are able to understand Hemingway’s old fisherman as Jesus, “fisher of men,” so long as we can say “this means that.”

We also can see the method at work in the Passover Haggadah, where verses from Deuteronomy 26:7 are read with this lens. The method of interpretation is pure Greek allegory: “This means that.”

“God saw our affliction” this means that God saw the separation of husbands from their wives. . . .

. . . “and our burden” this means the sons who were thrown into the Nile. . . .

. . . “and our pressure” this means the Egyptians’ oppression of us.

These methods of interpretation persist throughout rabbinic midrashic readings of the Bible. After the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE, rabbinic interpretation of Scripture became urgent; the absence of the sacrificial cult that figures so prominently throughout the Five Books of Moses required that these biblical passages be reinterpreted. Other passages needed explication so that observance of Torah law might continue. The rabbis established a virtual cottage industry of interpreting the Bible. Midrash—rabbinic interpretation of the Bible—was the calling card of their movement. Masters and disciples studied the sacred text and reread it with a keen eye toward proving its eternal relevance.

The earliest rabbis compiled lists of rules for interpretation. Their debt to Roman modes of interpretation is palpable. One famous list begins with two rules that were patently taken from the world of Roman rhetoric. The first of those is reasoning from minor premise to major premise. Let me give you two examples of how it works, one from the Passover Haggadah and a second relating to Passover observance.

In the Haggadah we count and recount the many marvels God wrought during the Exodus from Egypt. We list each miracle individually, and we sing “*Dayyenu*,” which means “it would have been enough.” The point is sweet: any *one* of those miracles would have been awesome and amazing, how much the more so *all* of the many miracles of the Exodus and the miracles during the years of wandering in the wilderness. The key to understanding this passage comes in the phrase “how much the more so.” We have gone from the minor/weaker—one single miracle—to the major/stronger—a whole heap of miracles. If we are grateful for one, *a fortiori*, we are grateful to God for the many, many miracles God bestowed upon the Jewish people. Did you catch my use of Latin there? *A fortiori* means “to the

major/stronger.” You can see it relates to the rule of interpretation from minor to major, or from weak to strong, by looking at the Latin root “fort” (think: fortitude). A *fortiori* reasoning was a principle of Roman rhetoric.

Here is another example, this one about observing the detailed rules of Passover. Let us reason from minor to major. If on the Passover holiday it is permitted to cook, still, an observant Jew is not permitted to write on the holiday. *How much the more so* on Shabbat, when it is *not* permitted to cook, it is not permitted to write! A *fortiori*; *q.e.d.* (*quod erat demonstrandum* = thus it has been demonstrated).

We move on to the second rule borrowed from Greco-Roman rhetoric, called in Hebrew *gezera shavah*, “an equation of equals.” You can take my word that this phrase is awkward Hebrew. It is a rather literal translation of the Greek term taught by our friend Libanius: *syngkrisis pros ison*, which means an “equation of equals.” As a rule for interpretation, it is pretty sensible. If you don’t know what a given word means in one context, find it elsewhere and infer from the second context what it means in the first place. The earliest rabbis are somewhat restrained in their uses of this interpretive method. Here’s an example of how they interpreted the Deuteronomy 26 passage we’ve been quoting from the Passover Haggadah:

“And the Egyptians **oppressed** us” (Deut. 26:6). As it is said, “So they put task masters over them in order to **oppress** them with their burdens, that they build garrison cities for Pharaoh: Pithom and Raamses.” (Ex. 1:11)

How do we know what it meant when Deuteronomy said that Egypt oppressed the Israelites? We look to a passage in Exodus that uses the same term for “oppression” and provides some details for interpretation. The “oppression” is understood as building garrison cities for Egypt. This is a way of interpreting Scripture with Scripture, but also specifically zeroing in on a common word the two verses share. That’s the comparison of equals.

Later rabbis, bless their hearts, got absolutely slap-happy finding the same Hebrew verbal root all over the Bible and then inferring all kinds of stuff from one context to the next. So long as two verses

shared a word in common, those rabbis asserted that they were actually about the same thing. You can appreciate how radical a means of interpretation this could be when the rabbis blithely say that verse A has the word “to” in it, and verse B has the word “to” in it, hence they must be talking about the same thing. Wow, using this method you can make anything mean anything you want it to. Cool, but perhaps a bit scary when we realize that the rabbis are making restrictive rulings about what Jews can and cannot do—Jewish law. By the fourth century, the rabbis themselves decided to call a halt to this type of radical interpretation; it was too slippery a slope.

The rabbis were more comfortable invoking Greek rules for interpreting Scripture when the material was nonlegal (aggadic), and so the stakes didn’t seem quite so high. They were sufficiently relaxed that they called these interpretive techniques by their original Greek names. We will briefly review two: *geometria* (related to the term *geometry*) and *notarikon* (like a notary public).

In *geometria*, and this is equally true in Greek or Hebrew, each letter has a numerical value. If this worked in English, we’d say that $a=1$, $b=2$, $c=3$, $d=4$, $e=5$, and so on. So the word “cab” would have a value of 6 ($3+1+2$), while “dad” would have a value of 9 and so be “equivalent to “Ed” (you can do the math). In Greek $\alpha=1$, $\beta=2$, $\gamma=3$, et cetera. In Hebrew $a=1$, $b=2$, $g=3$, so that in Hebrew the word for father, Abba (aba), adds up to 4 ($1+2+1$). How does it work in Scriptural interpretation? An example from the fifth-century Genesis Rabbah (42:2) comments on the curious fact that in Genesis 14:14, Abraham hears that his nephew has been taken captive and rides out to his rescue with 318 warriors. And so, you really have to ask: where did they all come from?

Rabbi Shim’on ben Laqish says, “It was Abraham’s servant Eliezer, all by himself; for the numerical value of the name Eliezer equals 318 ($a=1$; $l=30$; $y=10$; $c=70$; $z=7$; $d=200$)!”

Thanks to *geometria* we can now imagine Abraham and his servant Eliezer riding off to do battle, like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.

And what about that other Greek method, *notarikon*? It presumes that each word is, in fact, shorthand, a series of acronyms forming a new amalgam, like “scuba” (= Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus) or “CentCom” (= Central Command). The *notarius* was the Greek shorthand writer who served as court reporter and recorded verbatim an ad-lib speech. If one assumes that words of Scripture can be read as such, then through *notarikon* we might assume that the first word of the Torah, *beresheet* (“In the beginning”), is a form of shorthand and may be divided into two constituent words: *bara sheet*. If we translate these Hebrew and Aramaic words, as did the rabbis, we may conclude that God created (*bara*) six (*sheet*) things before God created anything else.

Earlier, when I was describing the Passover Seder and the symposium, I mentioned that at some point during the symposium, before it descended into debauchery, the narrator summarized the evening’s discussions and quotations using mnemonic or memory devices. In the Passover Haggadah, when the ten plagues are enumerated, Rabbi Yehudah recalls them by means of such a memory device. It says in Hebrew that he used *simanim*. The singular is *siman*, which is simply a transliteration of the Greek word *seimeion*, a sign or mnemonic. We use the word in English, too. English majors will recognize the word *semiotic*. Sailors will wave the flag in *semaphore*. The code succinctly delivers the longer message.

The symposium, of course, frequently quoted from what the Greeks called “the divine Homer.” Indeed, Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were central to the entire Greco-Roman canon. Greeks did not, perhaps, afford the esteem to Homer that Jews show to the Torah scroll. However, Homer’s poems were the texts that were used in teaching Greek reading, grammar, and spelling. Homer was memorized by students, and the myths of Homer pervaded the culture. Interpreting Homer was what gave the Alexandrian commentators something to do each day at their famous library.

The very methods the Alexandrians used for understanding Homer’s works became the methods the rabbis themselves used to interpret the Bible. Yes, the rabbis adapted the reading strategies of the Greeks to read and interpret their own Hebrew canon. To say this another way: the rabbis read the Bible through the lenses of their own time. Furthermore, the division of Homer’s epics the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*

into twenty-four books each was the inspiration for the rabbis' creatively enumerating the Hebrew Bible as twenty-four books.

Homer and his books were the premier example that rabbis used when referring to works of Greek literature. Indeed, the rabbis grappled with Homer's status in their own community. The Mishnah refers to him explicitly in a debate they imagined taking place between the ancient Sadducees and Pharisees on the canonical status of Scripture. The Mishnah teaches:

The Saducees say: We complain against you Pharisees, for you say that sacred Scripture renders one's hands unfit, yet the books of Homer do not! . . . Rabbi Yohanan explained that as they are revered, so is their ability to render unfit. The Bible, which is revered, renders the hands unfit; while the works of Homer are not revered, so they do not render hands unfit. (Yadayim 4:6)

This rule seems counterintuitive. I might expect that unfitness should characterize unwanted books. Yet the rabbis wished to protect Jewish sacred texts from stains, book-worms, and vermin. To do so they declared that sacred texts would henceforth “render the hands ritually unfit” if they were touched. In the rabbinic mind-set, no one whose hands were unfit would then eat food when handling books, since by merely touching the food, it also became unfit—and therefore forbidden to consume. This prohibition kept people from eating anywhere near biblical texts. The result of affording this extraordinary degree of protection means that any book that “renders the hands ritually unfit” is considered canonical or sacred to the rabbis. The Mishnah cannot resist taking a poke at Homer in the contrast they make. The Torah is sacred, which must mean then that Homer is, in essence, secular and presumably not revered. So there!

In truth, the works of Homer were revered by the Greeks much as was the Torah by the rabbis. The Palestinian Talmud (Sanhedrin 10:1, 28a) to some degree recognizes this when it declares that reading Homer is permissible. Yet the rabbis' ambivalence is apparent when they explain that one who reads Homer is not reading a forbidden document, but rather it is like “reading a secular document.”

In other Jewish legal contexts, Homer's "secular" nature is contrasted by the rabbis to the sacred nature of Jewish texts. On the Sabbath, it is forbidden to carry objects from a private domain into the public domain. "But what if there is a fire on Shabbat?" the rabbis ask. Their answer is that the Bible must be saved. The Babylonian Talmud (Hullin 60b, following the manuscript readings) goes so far as to say that there are many verses of Scripture that seem random and uninspired and so might be thought appropriate "to burn as one would allow the books of Homer to burn" and not be saved on Shabbat. Yet they rule that in the end, *all* verses of Hebrew Scripture are essential Torah and must be saved, while Homer, alas, may not be saved. I think we can infer from this ruling that there were Jewish institutions that had both Torah scrolls as well as scrolls of Homer housed within them!

Finally, in a poignant short narrative, the medieval Midrash to Psalms (1:8) imagines King David, purported author of all of the Psalms, yearning that his poetry will "be studied like the Mishnah is studied, and not merely like the songs of Homer." What a lovely anachronism. David yearns for his poetry to be studied like the Mishnah, which in fact was composed twelve hundred years later than Psalms. What do all three works—Psalms, Mishnah, and the epics of Homer—have in common? They were regarded by their communities as sacred texts, each in its own fashion. And each was recited publicly, which is to say chanted aloud by memory.

I told you the story about Bar Kappara and his public recitation of three hundred fox fables to spoil the feast that was given to appease him. The rabbis used fox fables, Aesop's fables, animal narratives, motifs from the Alexander romances, snippets of Homeric narrative, whatever it took to get their point across. Of course, even while they employed well-known Greek fables, they also drew heavily on the store of fabulous animal narratives in the Bible, which includes both a talking snake (Gen. 3) and a talking donkey (Num. 22).

One of the richest means the rabbis used to explicate complex ideas in simple, concrete, oral performance was the king parable. When the rabbis spoke about God, they did not employ lofty theology. Instead, they invoked a king parable, which opens with the phrase:

“Let me give you an analogy. What does this matter resemble? A king of flesh and blood who . . .” There are hundreds of these king parables found through centuries of rabbinic literature. They provide a necessary rabbinic analogy to God, because unlike the Greeks, the rabbis did not develop an abstract theological vocabulary. Instead, they compared God to a human king, saying how God was either like or unlike that human monarch. Thus they were able to explain otherwise complicated notions in a memorable form. They also invoked these king parables to explicate verses of Scripture.

Most rabbinic king parables had two parts (not unlike the fables of Aesop): first the parable (*mashal*) and then the moral to the story or analogue to the parable (*nimshal*). What is astonishing about the rabbinic composition of these king parables is that the overwhelming majority of them have fairly precise parallels in Greco-Roman literature. In 1903 a scholar named Ignaz Ziegler published an almost seven-hundred-page book laying out the rabbinic king parables and their Greco-Roman parallels. Even more amazing than the man’s thoroughness and breadth of knowledge was the fact that so many of the literary parallels were from Greco-Roman historical literature. In other words, the rabbis drew analogies to God by talking about the emperors and local Roman governors of their own eras. This is a daring means of expressing their theology; and it revealed the authors of these king parables to be utterly conversant with local Roman news. It is like a rabbi or minister preaching her sermon by making an analogy from the *New York Times*, if you could imagine that.

Two examples will suffice. The first is a commentary on the first verse of Genesis (which I will translate following its original Hebrew word order, so you get what the rabbinic Midrash is driving at):

“In the beginning / created / God / the heaven / and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). Rabbi Yudan quoted Aquila, “ ‘This one is fitting to be called God.’ In the way of the world, a king of flesh and blood is praised [*mitkales*] in a city before he has built public baths [*demosiaot*] and before he has given them waterworks [*phraktasia*].”

Shimeon ben Azzai said “[a king of] flesh and blood

mentions his name and then his works [*ktisma*]: so and so *augustali*, the most illustrious [*ho lamprotatos*]. But the Blessed Holy One is not so, rather only once God has created the needs of the world does God mention his name, ‘In the beginning created,’ and only then does it say ‘God.’” (Gen. Rabbah 1:12)

I am fortunate that Rabbi Lieberman unpacked this story in detail. First, let us note that one of the sages quoted is named Aquila. This is not only a good Greek name, but this Aquila was a convert from a pagan religion who is reputed to have translated the Torah into Greek. All of the words above in italics are, in fact, Greek words transliterated in the Hebrew text. When the king is praised, the term used, *mitkales*, comes specifically from praise of the Roman emperor. As soon as the Roman emperor appeared in a town, folks lined the road shouting, “*Ho Kalos!*” (This one is Good!). Aquila says of God, “This one is fitting to be called God.” In so doing he contrasts God with the flesh-and-blood Roman emperor—who more often than not was deified by the Roman senate. The usual public works bestowed upon a town are listed: public baths and waterworks. Imperial funds or extremely wealthy townsfolk paid for the aqueducts and the baths in most towns; they were simply too expensive to build otherwise. These public works, called *ktisma* in Greek, were uniformly praised and listed in detail on imperial statues throughout the Roman world.

When Shimeon ben Azzai talks about how the Roman grandees are listed along with their titles, he may as well be reading from monumental inscriptions or perhaps even from a synagogue donor plaque. To be called an *augustali* (minor Augustus) was not just idle praise; it was a title bestowed by the Roman emperor and noted on statues and tombs. The same is true of the title “most illustrious.” In Latin this would be a *vir clarissimus*, and in Greek it would be *ho lamprotatos*, just like in our Midrash. The rabbis took note of the world around them and knew who was who. The title *lamprotatos* actually appears in the Greek donor mosaic of the Hammat Tiberias synagogue!

The rabbis not only knew who was who, they also knew what was

what. The same fifth-century Midrash tells the following story to comment on Genesis 2:1, “The heaven and earth were finished.”

Rabbi Euphos expounded in Antioch, “finished” means smitten or put an end to. This is like a king [of flesh and blood] who enters a town and the townsfolk praise [*kilsu*] him, and their praises [*kilusin*] pleased him. So he increased the races and the chariots [*ayniokhos*]. Later they angered him, so he decreased the races and the chariots [*ayniokhos*].

Our Rabbi Euphos (a Greek name meaning “good light”) is in the city of Antioch, which we visited earlier. There, he teaches about how God “finished off” the works of creation, much like the emperor brought an end to the imperial games and fired the charioteers. Again, the terminology is in Greek, transliterated into the Hebrew text. A fourth- to fifth-century Roman history work (*Scriptores Historiae Augustae*) reports that the citizens of Antioch supported a pretender to the throne who sought to overthrow Marcus Aurelius Antoninus and deify himself instead. It states about Antoninus (remember him?), “He nevertheless pardoned the citizens of Antioch . . . but he did abolish their races and public entertainments.” It seems the rabbis’ king parables were ripped from the headlines.

Greek folk sayings and tales were also among the currency of rabbinic story telling. As a case in point, many rabbinic texts tell the story of a woman who went over to her neighbor’s house so they could bake bread together. Because she was leaving her house, she rolled three coins into her apron, just in case. When they went to knead the dough, however, she put the coins on the counter and accidentally rolled them into the dough. When the bread came out of the oven she took her loaves but then noted that her coins were missing. Her neighbor swore on the life of her son that she did not have the coins. The son died. When the first neighbor went to console her, the foolish mourner brought up the missing coins and swore on the life of her second son. He died. The same thing happened to her third son. The moral to the story is related in Aramaic: “This is what folks say: whether right or wrong, flee from an oath!” (Lev. Rabbah

6:3). The exact same formula is invoked in a collection of Greek proverbs. Folk sayings are fungible from Greek to Aramaic.



EQUESTRIAN MARCUS ANTONINUS—CAPITOLINE MUSEUMS, ROME

Again and again, the rabbis employed the methods of the Roman world they lived in to deliver their Jewish message. Proverbs, rhetoric, fables, interpretation, symposia, narratives: all came directly from the Roman repertoire. Greek and Roman education and culture was as much the turf of the rabbis as the borscht belt was to Jewish comedy. As they themselves might have said, *Excelsior!*

How Many Languages Does a Jew Need to Know?

“Ay, he spoke Greek.”

—SHAKESPEARE, *Julius Caesar*, Act 1, Scene 2

As a fifteen-year-old, I made my first visit to Israel. I wandered the streets, carefully sounding out the letters on store signs, proud of my ability to read the alphabet and, often enough, translate the words. One sign read in Hebrew, *sefarim*, and I knew that meant “books.” Another sign read, *falafel*, which no longer needs translating, although it was a mystery back then. Yet another read, *bank*, which actually meant “bank.” *Kafe* meant “café.” And *televisia* meant “television!” That last sign was a hard nut to crack, for it had so many letters and required pronunciation out loud to reveal its meaning.

I invoke the ascendancy of English vocabulary in Israel and, while we’re at it, elsewhere around the world as an example by which I can highlight the dominance of Greek in Roman Palestine. The preponderance of English usage points to the outsized influence American culture has today. Given the state of television and Hollywood, this is a decidedly mixed blessing, and I suppose the ancient rabbis might have felt the same way about the Greco-Roman influences, such as theaters and gladiator spectacles. That said, the rabbis were not shy about deploying Greek for the *mot juste* or using Latin terms when speaking of the military or court system. They achieved a certain *je ne sais quoi* when they trotted out Greek, much like we do when using French or, perhaps still, even Latin. As a lawyer

might say, *res ipsa loquitur*; it speaks for itself.

But just how loudly did Greek and Latin speak within the ancient Jewish communities? Did every Jew know Greek? Or perhaps most rabbis lamented, like Shakespeare's Casca, "but, for mine own part, it was Greek to me." All told, we are talking about *thousands* of Greek words entering the rabbinic lexicon—enough to make it clear that every rabbi must have known at least some Greek, even those who were not fluent. Still other rabbis and Jews of Roman Palestine, we shall see, most probably spoke Greek as their primary language. Roman Palestine was a trilingual society in the first two centuries CE, with more Hebrew in the south, more Aramaic in the villages, and more Greek in the big cities. Over time, Hebrew usage diminished and became more academic, so that the concentration of Jews in the Galilee during the third through sixth centuries CE spoke primarily Aramaic and Greek, depending on where they lived and to whom they were speaking.

The synagogues of Roman Palestine were not exactly like the ones we attend today, even though I might argue that in our own sanctuaries there is a similar mixture of Hebrew and English, with the mix shifting in ratio from Orthodox to Reform synagogues. Not so very long ago, Yiddish was a third language in the American synagogue linguistic mix. But, as I move away from this inexact analogy, I will argue that the rabbis of the Talmud and Midrash—that is, the Jewish literature that still exists from the ancient period—had far less to do with synagogue life than do rabbis now. There is a growing consensus that the rabbis named in ancient Jewish literature were primarily academics, confined to their disciple circles. Synagogue leadership depended on others: some who were laity (like today's synagogue board members) and others who were perhaps some kind of clergy (but we do not know much more about them). These synagogue leaders spoke Aramaic and Greek. In the previous chapter alone we saw the use of Greek words like *ho kalos* (the Good); *augustali* (most august); *ho lamprotatos* (most illustrious), and this last example came from a synagogue floor in Tiberias, a large population and rabbinic center in the Galilee.

In nearby Caesarea, the Talmud (p. Sota 7:1, 21b) reports that a congregation not only had Greek inscriptions but recited the *Shema* in

Greek! This is worth notice not only because recitation of the *Shema* is central to Jewish liturgy, but also because it is made up of passages from the Torah itself, so we might have expected the synagogue members in Caesarea to know the prayer in the Hebrew original. When Rabbi Levi sought to put a stop to the practice, Rabbi Yosé rebuked him and said, “Just because they cannot read Hebrew letters you wish them to not recite at all? Rather, they should recite it in whatever language they know.”

I would have expected Hebrew from the Jews at least in their prayers and their public reading of what is, after all, Hebrew Scriptures. Yet in a synagogue in the Land of Israel, in a major center of rabbinic learning, there was a congregation of Jews who prayed in Greek because they could not, in fact, read Hebrew. Nor, apparently, could the Jews of Caesarea even recite in Hebrew by memory, like a bar mitzvah boy today might, as they did not speak the language sufficiently to do so.

The same passage of the Talmud makes clear that some rabbis thought one should pray in synagogues in Greek or in whatever language they “could make known their hearts’ desires.” I assume that the rabbis thought God could understand Greek as well as Hebrew. But still, I find it somewhat surprising that in the heart of the Land of Israel there was such ignorance of Hebrew. While I am used to such a lament here in America, I did not expect to hear rabbis kvetching about lack of Hebrew back in the fourth century CE in the Galilee. Further, the Talmud says that Jews should recite the blessings after eating food “in whatever language they employed to acknowledge the One Whom they were blessing.” If the Jews did not use Hebrew in synagogues, there was little chance they would do so when praying at home. But this rabbinic concession to Greek usage in prayers indicates just how much Greek outweighed Hebrew in the Land of Israel.

The case for using Greek during prayer goes further. As in water-parched California, the Jews of the Land of Israel were somewhat obsessive about rain. In their Hebrew prayers they prayed for “rain in its season” or for vivifying “dew” during the hot summer months, as Jews still do today in drought-stricken areas. But the mid-third century Galilean rabbi Resh Lakish noted (p. Shevuot 3:10, 34d), “One who sees it is beginning to rain and says *kyrie poly brekson*, is taking

an oath in vain. . . .” You may infer from the word *kyrie* at the beginning of that short prayer that this entreaty was uttered in Greek. Resh Lakish declares it “an oath in vain” not because it is in Greek, but because once the rain has begun, the die has been cast. To pray for the nature of the rain to change from light rain, say, to abundant rain would be to take God’s name in vain. Indeed, the Greek of the too-eager petitioner means: “God [*kyrie*] let much [*poly*] rain fall.” You can almost hear The Band sing it: “rainmaker . . . let these crops grow tall.”

In the Land of Israel in the Roman era, then, the language of prayer was often the primary spoken language of the one who was praying. This was recognized by the rabbis, who, while they preferred to pray in Hebrew—what they called The Holy Tongue—accepted that prayers should be uttered in the language of “ones heart’s desire.” Practically, this meant Greek for the larger urban centers.

Oddly enough, a Greek word or two has even snuck into the Hebrew prayer books that traditional Jews use to this day, whether here in America or in the modern State of Israel. When the standard prayers were being formulated, the emperor was the central figure in the Roman world. So there are many instances of the rabbis employing the vocabulary of imperial etiquette. When the emperor visited a town, the citizens came out to greet him, shouting, *Ho Kalos!* Whether it was true or not, they were proclaiming of their ruler that he was “the Good.” This same proclamation, *Ho Kalos*, has made its way into rabbinic Hebrew and appears in Greek, conjugated as though it were a Hebrew verb; it appears in Jewish prayer books as *ulekaleis*, part of a string of verbs with which Jews declare the desire to praise, extol, glorify, and proclaim the Goodness of God.

I was taught many years ago that this strangely Hebraized loanword from Greek is one of but two in the formal Hebrew liturgy. The other loanword from Greek found in the Jewish prayer book is invoked only on certain fast days. On those occasions when some historical tragedy is recalled and mourned, Jews bemoan that they were overrun by *legionot*, the Roman legions. It is an irony that even when the rabbis recall Rome as the ancient enemy, the Greek language of the majority society seeps into the otherwise Hebrew liturgy.

Prayer is a natural outpouring of the heart. I had a friend who, before he died, surprised me by admitting that he, a hard-boiled Madison Avenue executive, prayed every morning. He characterized it with the panache of a lifelong ad man, saying, “Some days it’s more ‘Please,’ and some days it’s more ‘Thank You.’” I am certain that my late friend made his daily prayers in English—spontaneous Hebrew was not part of his linguistic repertoire. This captures, I think, what happens when folks just speak their hearts to God. Even in the ancient world, Jews prayed in the tongue most comfortable to them—as I suppose should be the case for all sincere prayer.

This also can be seen in a folk prayer, which in this case one might equally characterize as folk magic. The prayer I am about to show you was found half a century ago, when a scholar was researching among Hebrew fragments preserved in an ancient Jewish book depository discovered in Fustat, or Old Cairo, Egypt. Among the thousands upon thousands of personal documents uncovered in what is called the Cairo Geniza—its manuscripts and fragments are now preserved in libraries around the world—he found an incantation that begins in good rabbinic Hebrew and shares many formulae with standard rabbinic prayers. But then it veers wildly off course. This prayer is part of a work from the third or fourth century, appropriately called *Sefer HaRazim*—the Book of Mysteries. The particular prayer is recorded in Greek and carefully transcribed into Hebrew letters, but to ice the cake, the prayer is addressed to Helios! We have already seen that the Greek god Helios appears in zodiac mosaics of synagogue floors in the Galilee and elsewhere in the Holy Land. In beautiful rabbinic Hebrew, *Sefer HaRazim* offers prayers to God and to the angels. In the section of the work titled “The Fourth Heaven,” it instructs the would-be mystic:

If you wish to see the sun at night, travel north. Purify yourself for three weeks of all food and drink and everything unclean. At the third hour of the night stand watch, wrapped in white garments, and pronounce twenty-one times the name of the sun and the names of the angels that accompany it at night. And say: “I adjure you O angels who fly in the air of the firmament . . . in the name of the

Holy King who travels on the wings of the wind, by the letters of the explicit divine name that were revealed to Adam in the Garden of Eden, Who reigns over all the constellations, and to Whom bow the sun and the moon like slaves to their master . . . I adjure you to make known to me this great miracle that I request, to show me the sun in its might upon its wheeled chariot . . . and tell me the deep secrets and make known to me all devices, but may he not harm me by any evil.” And when you have finished speaking you will hear the sound of thunder from the north and see something like lightning illuminate the earth before you. After he has shown you thus, bow and fall on your face to the earth, and pray this prayer.

Did you catch that? The person uttering this prayer has just requested to see “the sun in its might upon its wheeled chariot,” and at night, no less. What follows is the prescribed prayer for seeing the sun, or Helios. It is twenty-two words of Greek, transcribed in Hebrew letters. Professor Daniel Sperber deciphered the Hebrew script into Greek. I follow his translation into English from the decoded Greek:

I revere you HELIOS, who rises in the east, the good sailor who keeps faith, the heavenly leader who turns the great celestial wheel, who orders the holiness [of the planets], who rules over the poles, Lord, radiant ruler, who fixes the stars.

Now that’s a lot of Greek! I promise to return to this bizarre example of a Jewish prayer from fourth-century Roman Palestine. The Greek language so carefully transcribed teaches us that Jews offered their prayers in a language they hoped would be effective—Greek—and perhaps prayed to a Greek god who they thought could be effective: Helios.

Even among the thousands of works found in the old Cairo Geniza, the existence of books such as *Sefer HaRazim* was very rare. Indeed, the existence of any book was rare, given how difficult it was to

actually produce a book. The wealthy hired specialists who had to know a great deal in order to manufacture a book: writing in one or more languages, the production of papyrus or parchment. If the former, you needed to know how to work the reeds. If the latter, you needed to start with an animal, strip and preserve its skin, remove the hair, whiten the hide's surface, score it with guidelines, prepare an ink that would not run, etc. This was a hugely time-consuming and extremely expensive venture. The rabbis did promote the manufacture of Torah scrolls, but the rabbis' own teachings were transmitted orally, by memory. To some very real extent this was true for Greek books, too. Homer was said to be a blind poet whose works were recited or sung. In a form of reverse snobbery, *reading* the works of Homer (or of the rabbis, I suppose) was considered a kind of cheating.

The rabbis lived in a world where books were nonetheless well known. Each synagogue shared communal books, such as a Torah scroll. Actual prayer books were less common, as Jews recited their prayers by memory or the prayer leader did so while others simply responded, "Amen." But there were other kinds of books in the Jewish community; we have read evidence of Greek books. Despite this, or perhaps in an effort to promote use of Hebrew, the rabbis only reluctantly acknowledged the existence of books written in Greek, and did so in very few instances. In the Mishnah (m. Yadaim 4:6), the rabbis refer to "the books of Homer." In a wickedly clever pun, the rabbis compare the books of Homer at first to Jewish sacred texts, and then analogize them to the bones of an ass. The Hebrew phrase for "bones of an ass," *atsamot hamor*, sounds an awful lot like the Greek phrase for the "songs of Homer," *asimat homerou*. It is a clever put-down of the sacred text of the Greeks. The bilingual pun was noted by Daniel Sperber, the same smart fellow who translated that Greek prayer to Helios.

This kind of disrespect for Homer is, alas, not uncommon among the rabbis, especially in the locker-room atmosphere of the rabbinic academy. I refer to what began as small groups of young men who attended a master, their rabbi. Like the Greek philosophers, these small disciple circles took pride in their cleverness and set themselves apart from others. Over time, as the rabbis grew in strength, the groups of rabbis' disciples formed schools. In addition to the Torah

and wisdom they learned, they behaved like the boys they often were—poking fun at outsiders with juvenile wit. Scattered throughout the rabbinic literature that remains, we can find barbs directed at Gentiles, Christians, non-rabbinic Jews, and at women, too. Sigh. Would that all the rabbis were a tad more, well, rabbinic. Truly this was a case of boys being boys.

Another example of this kind of disrespect is seen in a similar Greek-to-Hebrew bilingual pun found in manuscripts of the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 116a—it has been removed from most printed editions by Christian censors). There, the New Testament—in Greek: *evangelium*—is punned in Hebrew as *avon gilayon*, the scroll of sin. While both of these puns are unfortunate, painful, puerile, and impertinent, they do demonstrate a command of Greek among the rabbis sufficient for bilingual wordplay—no small feat.

Given this linguistic aptitude, we are not surprised to find entire phrases, sentences, and idioms from Greek carefully preserved in Hebrew letters in rabbinic texts. This use of Greek is somewhat hard to decipher, all in all. Were the rabbis native Greek speakers who spoke Hebrew only in the rabbinic academy? To be sure, Hebrew was quite uncommon as a spoken language in the Galilee. More likely the language competition was between Greek and Aramaic. I’ve already noted that Greek was more urban, while Aramaic was more rural. Still, both languages were widespread, with Hebrew running a distant third as a kind of formal, scholastic language. Greek was used in rabbinic circles for a variety of purposes. At times, the Greek was exactly the right term for what was being discussed. Or Greek was trotted out for effect—displaying the cultural pretensions of the speaker. Finally, we must consider the possibility that Greek was just easier for certain speakers than were Aramaic or Hebrew, so they lapsed into Greek for a bit of linguistic relief. That’s what the prayer for rain we saw above feels like to me.

The rabbis employed Greek, transcribed into Hebrew letters, in their own Hebrew and Aramaic literature. I will try to demonstrate the breadth of their range of uses. As an example, e.g. (I can’t resist citing instances in which we English speakers trot out Greek or Latin, even now), we find the phrase—transliterated here into Latin characters—*para basileus ho nomos agrophos*. The Greek translates as, “For the king

the law is unwritten,” which the rabbis (Lev. Rabbah 35:3) correctly understand to mean that the king does not feel constrained to follow the law. The rabbis offer their contrast: God, the King of the king of kings, follows the laws of the Torah scrupulously. The phrase used is in Greek, for surely that’s how they heard it in response to their protests about this or that. The reply they heard: *para basileus ho nomos agrophos*—get over it, the world isn’t fair and the law is not observed by everyone. The rabbis use the Greek phrase here as a sharp rejoinder to the lack of respect for law they observed among Roman authorities.

In the Palestinian Talmud (Berakhot 9:1), we are treated to a barrage of Greek terminology about the emperor and the imperial government. It is not surprising, upon reflection, to find Greek employed in discussion of the court, where Greek was the language of discourse. The emperor is referred to as *basileus*, *kaisar*, *augustus*, with all three Greek imperial titles—king (e.g., basilica), general (Caesar), augustus (as in the adjective *august*)—written in Hebrew characters. The emperor is also repeatedly referred to as *patron*, as though he were a Mafia don or a politician who took care of his precinct workers. Elsewhere in rabbinic literature, the emperor is grandiosely styled as *kosmocrator*, ruler of the cosmos. This is said tongue in cheek in the Talmud, as not only is the emperor compared to God—Who in the rabbis’ eyes is the One and Only ruler of the universe—but it is dryly noted that this term is employed much as the term *hyparch*, a local governor, is used. The emperor may think he’s hot stuff, but compared to God he’s a *schlepper*.

Many rabbinic sources tell a story about the Roman Caesar Vespasian and Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai. When Vespasian was a general besieging Jerusalem, the great rabbi escaped the city in a coffin and made his way to him. The tale was popular as mythic history, an account of how the rabbinic circle first was established in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple. In the Talmudic version of this legend (Gittin 56a–b), Rabbi Yohanan greets Vespasian in Aramaic. In another rabbinic version, the rabbi greets the emperor in Hebrew, saying, “Long live my lord the Emperor!” But in the manuscripts of Lamentations Rabbah, which probably reflect the earliest and most authentic telling of the tale, the rabbi says the same

thing in good military Latin: *Vive Domini Imperator!*

And then there is the story of the Emperor Hadrian, related back in chapter four. When Hadrian encountered the old man who was planting a fig tree, he asked him to bring him the fruit, should the elderly farmer live long enough to see the harvest. The old codger brought a cartful (Greek: *kartella*) of figs, and Hadrian declared, “I command [Greek: *keleunin*] to bring forth a golden divan [Greek: *sellion*] to seat him. I further command that you empty the wheelbarrow of figs and replace it with dinars [Greek: *denari*].” The narrative not only presents a sympathetic emperor, it displays correct knowledge of the emperor’s household: the language of imperial command (*keleunin*) and the furniture appropriate for someone of senior magistrate status, the *sella curulis*.

The educated rabbinic class clearly possessed a keen awareness of Greek that reflected either the high literary culture of the Roman world (Homer) or that of the imperial court. But they were not the only Jews who were fluent in Greek. Thirty years ago a group of scholars published a papyrus from Egypt written in Hebrew characters. It included the Greek word *lamprotatos* (most illustrious), which we have seen in Greek letters on a synagogue floor and which is represented in Hebrew characters in a fifth-century rabbinic commentary on the book of Genesis. The Egyptian papyrus in which *lamprotatos* is written dates to 1,600 years ago—the year 417 CE, to be precise. It is a marriage contract between two Egyptian Jews: Samuel son of Sampati and Metra daughter of Lazar. Mazal tov!

The Egyptian marriage contract shares many affinities with rabbinic marriage contracts, and where rabbinic-sounding technical language is used in the document, it is written in Aramaic. Given that to this day traditional Jewish marriage contracts are written in Aramaic using Hebrew characters, this is not surprising. But mixed in higgledy-piggledy with the Aramaic is Greek, also in Hebrew characters. The standard formula header for contracts, giving the date according to Roman rule, is recorded in Greek; later, when the items in the bride’s modest trousseau are listed, they are described in both Greek and Aramaic, all recorded on papyrus in the Hebrew alphabet. There is no mistaking the ease with which these average Egyptian Jews spoke both languages.

Thus far, I have focused on legal and more technical documents that reflect Greek as it was used in the daily lives of the ancient Jewish community. But Greek was also used by the rabbis in fifth-century Galilee when they discussed “natural science” (Gen. Rabba 14:2). Rabbi Huna explains that some children are born after seven months of gestation, others after eight. For reasons unexplained, the “seven-month” children thrive, while the eight-month children perish. Obviously, this is not empirical obstetrics and gynecology—note my use of Greek. Huna’s colleague Rabbi Abbahu offers an explanation by way of a Greek pun. Here, the entire linguistic transaction takes place in Greek. Abbahu relies on something we observed earlier: Greek letters each have numerical value. He says “*zeta hepta, eita okto*.” This could be depicted as a simple listing of the numerical value of the Greek letters, with *zeta* equaling seven and *eita* equaling eight:

$$zeta = \zeta = 7$$

$$eita = \eta = 8$$

But it can also be read as: *ze ta hepta, ei ta okto*—a Greek sentence that translates as, “The seventh lives [longer] than the eighth.” Clever Rabbi Abbahu displays his thorough facility with Greek language.

Rabbi Abbahu’s good Greek notwithstanding, many rabbis were content to display their knowledge of Greek culture by quoting in Aramaic or Hebrew translation rather than the Greek original. We have heard the story of the foolish woman who baked bread and took a vow on her sons’ lives. The moral to that story was, “Righteous or not, flee the oath,” which was reported in Aramaic in the rabbinic narrative. It is a precise translation of the Greek adage, much as we today might quote Lao Tzu’s “Even the thousand mile journey begins with the first step.” Very few people quote this in the original language. But most who quote it know it comes from Chinese culture. In other words, you can display cultural awareness even if you do not master the original tongue.

Of course, there is culture and then there is what we might call “low culture.” Think about the export of American television and movies, adored by fans worldwide—so long as the dialogue is dubbed or subtitled in the receiving culture’s language. Hollywood movies

often gross as much in foreign-language versions as they do in the English originals. But for the most part, people around the world are more likely to be viewing *Rambo* than a Handel opera. The same was true to some extent even in the ancient world. The trick when reading ancient Jewish literature is to recognize the Roman original behind the Hebrew or Aramaic dubbing, as it were. Here are two examples of popular culture from the world of Roman gaming: playing dice and horse racing.

It is true that Jews played dice and probably would have done so whether or not there ever was a Rome. But the idiom for the dice throws was distinctly Roman in the case at hand. The second-century Rabbi Shimeon ben Azzai critiqued the Jewish legal system by suggesting, “A Jewish dog’s ear is better than Jewish judges” (Deut. Rabbah, ed. Lieberman, p. 13). This otherwise opaque statement can be understood only if we know that when Romans threw dice, a three was called a “dog’s ear” (*kunotes*). Throwing a dog’s ear was a winner, and so a better bet than the Jewish courts of ben Azzai’s time.

Another rabbinic statement comes from the Roman racetrack: the hippodrome. Here we are in truly Roman territory, as archeological remains of these tracks abound in sites throughout the ancient Roman world. We already had occasion to refer to the races in Antioch. The circus races were incredibly popular. Charioteers were the rock stars of their day, with high earnings, and there are extant posters and graffiti supporting favorite drivers. The races were divided into four factions: red, white, blue, and green; and as with today’s sports, everyone had “their” team. In the fifth-century commentary Leviticus Rabbah, the Midrash twice (13:4 and 35:6) states in Aramaic: “Poverty is as becoming to the Jews as red reins on a white horse.” This sentiment is repeated in other rabbinic collections, and the comment is often interpreted in praise of poverty. Quite the contrary, however; throughout the Byzantine era, the “red” racing teams consistently lost. This rabbinic adage was an exercise in irony, disdaining poverty as a certain loser. The last thing to bet on was a red bridle.

Aphrodite and the Rabbis

The rabbis were monotheists living in a polytheistic environment. Everywhere they looked, they saw evidence of the pagan gods; especially idols. Jews did not entirely know what to make of this ubiquity of images, and there is a great deal of discussion among the rabbis about how to navigate their way through such an idolatrous world. The earliest document of the rabbis, the Mishnah, discusses the laws prohibiting idol worship (Avodah Zarah 3:4). The following story is offered there to explicate a shift in rabbinic legal attitudes toward pictorial art:

Proculus son of Philosophus inquired of Rabbi Gamaliel, who was bathing in the bathhouse of Aphrodite in Acco, “It is written in your Torah, ‘Let nothing that has been condemned stick to your hand’ (Deut. 13:18). So what are you doing in the bathhouse of Aphrodite?”

He replied, “One may not reply [to a question of Jewish law] in the bathhouse.”

When they exited, he said, “I did not come on to her territory, rather she came on to mine. It was not the case that they said, ‘Let us make a bathhouse as an adornment to Aphrodite.’ Rather they said, ‘Let us make an Aphrodite [statue] as an adornment for the bathhouse.’ Another thing, even if they said to you, ‘We will give you much wealth,’ you still would not enter your pagan temple naked or polluted, nor would you urinate in it. Yet this [statue of Aphrodite] stands before the gutter and everyone pees right in front of her!”

“The prohibition is only regarding images of the gods that are venerated as gods. That which is not venerated as a god is permissible to enjoy.”

Rabbi Gamaliel makes his point sharply. First, he displays his Jewish piety by refusing to engage in “Torah talk” while naked in the Roman bathhouse. Next, he disparages the behavior of those pagans in the baths toward the statue there. He demeans the questioner’s own religious piety, even as the oddly named Proculus son of Philosophus,

presumably meant to represent a knowledgeable pagan, invokes a verse of Jewish Scripture. Finally, Gamaliel pronounces a general principle that became the norm for accepting pictorial art in Jewish settings, despite the so-called prohibitions of the Second Commandment:

“You shall not make a sculptured image or any likeness of what is in the heavens above or on the earth below . . . you shall not bow down to them or worship them.” (Ex. 20: 4–5)

As Rabbi Gamaliel interprets it, only those images that are actually designed as objects of worship are forbidden. Sometimes a statue is just a statue.



MOSAIC APHRODITE IN SEPPHORIS/DIOCAESAREA

The rabbis also loved telling tales of the Roman demimonde. These stories caricatured the Romans by focusing on their seamy side. In the earliest rabbinic commentary to the biblical book of Numbers (Sifre, Shelah, #115), the rabbis gleefully narrate a heartwarming story about a happy hooker. Not surprisingly, the love goddess Aphrodite again appears.

Numbers 15:37–41 serves as the final section of the daily *Shema* prayer, and so the paragraph commanding Jews to wear fringes, *tsitsit*, on the corners of their garments was very well known. The last verse of the paragraph begins and ends with the phrase, “I am the Lord your God.” This is just enough information for you to follow the story and get the punch line of this rabbinic joke.

Rabbi Nathan said, “Each and every commandment in the Torah has its reward. We can learn this from the commandment of *tsitsit*. It once happened that there was a man who was very careful regarding the commandment of *tsitsit*. He heard there was a prostitute in a harbor town who charged four hundred gold pieces as her price. He sent her four hundred gold pieces and made his appointment for her services. When the day came, he went and sat in her antechamber. Her maid came and told her that the man who had the appointment had arrived. She said, ‘Let him enter.’

“When he entered she spread before him seven beds of silver and a bed of gold at the very top. Between each one was a bench [*subsellium*] of silver, and the topmost was gold. But when he came to do the deed, his four *tsitsit* arose like witnesses and slapped him in the face!

“He immediately disengaged and sat down on the ground. She, too, climbed down to the ground and sat next to him. She said, ‘*Agapé* of Rome! I will not allow you to leave unless you tell me what flaw you saw in me!’

“He replied, ‘By the Temple service! There is no one as beautiful as you in the world. But the Lord our God

commanded us a simple commandment wherein it is twice written, “I am the Lord your God.” The first time is to teach that God will reward us, and the second time teaches that God will also punish us.’

“She said, ‘By the Temple service! I will not allow you to leave until you write down your name, your city, and the name of the rabbinic academy where you learn Torah.’

“So he wrote what she desired and went on his way. She then arose and dispersed all of her wealth: one third to the government, one third she gave to the poor, and the final third she took with her to the rabbinic academy of Rabbi Hiyya. She asked him, ‘Rabbi, will you convert me?’

“He asked her, ‘Have you set your eye on one of my students?’

“She handed him the note that she was holding. Rabbi Hiyya called his student and said to him, ‘Rise now and take what you contracted for. When you first contracted for her it was forbidden. Now that she is converting, she shall be permitted to you.’

“If this is the reward for the commandment of *tsitsit* in this world, in the World to Come, I cannot even imagine!”

The joke demands some commentary, for even with a clever punch line, it remains a subtle narrative about the marriage of Judaism and Hellenism, both literally and figuratively. As we have come to expect, there are Greek words dotted through the story. The first, *subsellium*, is a technical term in both Greek and Latin for a small bench or step stool—the means of ascending from one bed to the next. When the beautiful woman is rejected after the bizarre comic incident with the ritual fringes (think Three Stooges slapstick), she uses a vow formula, swearing: “*Agapé* of Rome!” *Agapé* means love, in this case, a nickname for the love goddess Aphrodite. Our pretty prostitute takes her vow on the name of her patroness/goddess, while the hapless rabbinical student takes his vow “by the Temple service.” His is a remarkable vow, given the reality of the Jerusalem Temple lying in ruins. Perhaps it represents the state of his male, er, ego at that

moment.

Nevertheless, following their joint witness of what they take to be the mini-miracle of the slapping *tsitsit*, the prostitute herself is moved to switch her allegiance and she, too, vows “by the Temple service.” This is the first step in her conversion process. Next she depletes her great wealth by paying off the government in bribes to allow her to give up her profession—no doubt prostitution was a lucrative form of bribery income for the local officials. She spends one-third of her wealth on the poor—a benefaction common enough in the Jewish community but virtually unheard of among pagans. Finally, she comes to Rabbi Hiyya, who sagely discerns what has happened.

Every time my own rabbinical students read this story in its original Hebrew they stop at this point in the narrative and finally declare it too unbelievable. They simply cannot credit that the student who hired the prostitute would be stupid enough to give her his real name, let alone the name of the seminary where he studied! In our ancient rabbinic fantasy, however, Rabbi Hiyya not only susses out what happened, but then turns the woman over to the young man whose *tsitsit* reminded him that the paragraph of Numbers says,

“These shall be your *tsitsit*, that you may look at them and recall all of God’s commandments and observe them, so that you do not go astray after your heart and eyes, lusting after them.” (Num. 15:39)

The Hebrew word I translate in the biblical verse as “lusting” shares the same Hebrew root as the word for “prostitute” in our story. Although Rabbi Hiyya nowhere actually says his disciple may now marry the new convert, everything we know about rabbinic morality makes it clear that this must be the end of the story. The devotee to Aphrodite will come into God’s house. Greco-Roman Hellenism will enter the rabbinic academy and be permitted. They will happily marry; and in the world to come, who can even imagine?!

Love of Wisdom and Love of Law: In Pursuit of Philosophy and Justice

It wasn't all love all the time among the rabbis. Their culture was based on disputation—on virtually every one of the over five thousand pages of the Babylonian Talmud* you will find rabbis arguing with one another. Theirs was—in a memorable phrase from Pirke Avot, a tractate of the Mishnah, which is the backbone of the Talmud—“an argument for Heaven's sake.”

The stakes of the argument varied. Study was a form of divine service; and to the rabbis, argument in study was as much a way of sharpening the intellect God had granted them as it was of reaching a result. Rabbi Hama bar Hanina commented on the verse that reads: “As iron sharpens iron’ (Prov. 27:17)—just as one knife blade sharpens against another, so do two disciples of the sages sharpen one another” (Gen. Rabbah 69:28). For the most part, rabbis embraced dialectic—it was a path to exploring the parameters of Jewish law, while at the same time a path to knowing the One Who Spoke and brought the world into being. The dialectical mode of reasoning was often the end in and of itself. The rabbis reveled in what Greeks and Romans called Socratic dialogue. Argument, dispute, dialectic—these were the closest the rabbis came to philosophy, *per se*.

There were times when the stakes of the argument seemed very high. Early in the history of the rabbinic movement, arguments between prominent rabbis sometimes threatened to bring down the entire enterprise. It was one thing to strenuously argue a point. But there were occasions when the argument verged on the point of no

return. Haven't we all found ourselves at that precipice at one time or another? Sometimes, we do not even recall what the argument was about when it is finally over. But sometimes, arguments lead to a rupture in relations—and some of these can last many years. It's hard to walk back words spoken in anger.

We also know of political arguments, in which debate is a struggle over minutiae that seem to grow larger with every second they are disputed. In the very first generation of the rabbinic movement, in the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem, such an argument broke out between two of the great leaders of the rabbis. The disagreement quickly escalated to become a matter of power politics, which had potentially dire consequences for the survival of Judaism. On one side of the argument was a family dynasty: old money, well-connected, led by the brash young patriarch Rabbi Gamaliel. His opponent, Rabbi Yehoshua, was elderly, wise, and well-loved by his colleagues. He earned a paltry income digging peat moss to make charcoal and was, in theory, the second in command to the patriarch. Their argument would be akin to the president and vice president of the United States having a public dispute.

The debate was about how and when to proclaim the not-yet-regulated Jewish calendar. The year's cycle of months was based on the moon. Since it could be seen in the sky, it seemed a fairly easy thing to declare the new moon every month. This declaration determined on what day any holiday in that month might occur. Once witnesses came to the court and testified that they had seen the new moon, it was duly sanctified by the courts. This ancient method is still used by Muslims to determine the Islamic calendar today. The idea of having witnesses testify to what they saw in the sky predated the ability of ancient Jewish astronomers to calculate the calendar. The trouble came when the witnesses were less than reliable about what they saw. Let's let the Mishnah tell the story:

Once two witnesses came and said, "We saw it early morning in the East, and early evening in the West."

Rabbi Yohanan ben Nuri said, "They are false witnesses." Yet when they came to Yavneh, Rabbi Gamaliel accepted their testimony.

In another instance witnesses testified, “We saw it in its time, but on the night of its ‘birthing’ it was not seen.” Rabbi Gamaliel accepted them.

Dosa ben Harcinus said, “They are false witnesses! How can one testify that a woman has given birth and on the morrow her belly is still between her teeth?”

Rabbi Yehoshua said to him, “I agree with you.”

The quiet agreement of Rabbi Yehoshua with his colleague Dosa sets the conflict aflame. Now there is a very public power struggle between the two leading rabbis.

First, let me explain the text of this conflict, so we can see what they are arguing about so passionately. To see the new moon, you would ideally witness the thin sliver of the old moon one night, on the bottom left of the waning moon, and the thin sliver of the new moon the very next night, at the bottom right of the newly waxing moon.

The first set of witnesses said they saw the new moon in the early morning with the sunrise. Looking east, into the sun, they simply could not have seen the thin sliver of the new moon. Its narrow crescent would have been indiscernible in the glare of the rising sun. The same is true that night—they claim to be looking west into the setting sun, so they could not have seen the slight arc of the newly “born” moon.

The second set of witnesses offered even worse testimony. They said they saw the old moon but then said that on the night when they should have seen the new moon, “it was not seen” (I love their passive voice: mistakes were made). This is the worst possible testimony they could have offered! They basically said in court: we saw nothing. Therefore, one should conclude, they have no testimony. Yet Gamaliel said, “Hey, close enough. Let’s call it a new moon.” No wonder Rabbi Dosa not only called the witnesses false but piquantly described the birthing moon as though it were a birthing mother—you can’t say it gave birth if the next day she is still carrying so high that her belly is, as it were, between her teeth. No baby, no new moon, no new month. And Yehoshua, who also had had enough of Gamaliel’s shenanigans, sided with Rabbi Dosa, publicly disagreeing with Gamaliel. This was a strong challenge to his power, as it was over a potent issue—

regulating the calendar and holidays.

If it were a game of poker, Gamaliel would be deemed to be holding a very bad hand. Yet Gamaliel, player that he was, turned and commanded Rabbi Yehoshua regarding the month of Tishri, when the holiday of Yom Kippur (the holiest day of the Jewish calendar) fell on the 10th of the month:

I decree that you must appear before me with your walking staff and wallet on Yom Kippur as it falls according to your calculation.

Talk about cojones! The man had nothing but deuces, if that, and he commanded Yehoshua to show up before him on the very day Yehoshua deemed it to be Yom Kippur! It was as though Rabbi Yehoshua determined that the holy day of Yom Kippur was on Tuesday and, according to Rabbi Gamaliel, it should be on Thursday. Gamaliel commanded Yehoshua to show up on Tuesday as though it were just another work day. This was pure power politics. Gamaliel was really making Yehoshua knuckle under to his authority. But the way he did so is curious. Why did he command that Yehoshua appear with “staff and wallet” on Yom Kippur? Why not say, “Let’s have lunch together” on a day when eating was expressly forbidden? Of all the things he chose to command, why these two things? It is true that one should not handle money on Yom Kippur, but it is a minor prohibition. And there are surely rabbinic legal circumstances under which it would have been permissible for Yehoshua to carry his walking stick—for example, within a walled city or enclosure. What is the significance, then, of commanding him to show up on Yom Kippur carrying his staff and wallet?

Here, the Greek philosophers come to our assistance, for the staff and wallet were the universally recognized symbols of their calling. Diogenes Laertius, in his Greek work *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, writes of Antisthenes, “And he was the first . . . to take up a staff and a wallet. . . .” The great Cynic philosopher Crates writes to a new mother about her baby, “Rock him in a cradle . . . dress him not with a sword . . . but with a staff and a cloak and a wallet, which can guard men better than swords.” In his turn, Diogenes the Cynic writes to his

own father, “Do not be upset, father, that I . . . carry a wallet over my shoulders and have a staff in my hand.” Rabbi Gamaliel is commanding Rabbi Yehoshua to carry the very signs that identify him as a rabbi and sage, that is to say, a philosopher. Gamaliel forces Rabbi Yehoshua to kowtow publicly bearing the symbolic garb of his office.

Let’s leave behind the new moon and even the politics of the first generation of rabbis. But just to satisfy your curiosity, know this: Gamaliel won this argument when the great yet conservative Rabbi Aqiba sided with him on this issue. Aqiba said, “We cannot question authority as we will undermine the entire edifice. We may as well question Moses’ authority.” Rather than risk a split in the rabbinic community just as it was gaining its voice, Aqiba counseled acquiescence. So Rabbi Yehoshua and his colleagues lost the day, and Yehoshua appeared before Gamaliel as commanded. But you should also know that when Gamaliel publicly humiliated Rabbi Yehoshua yet again, the other rabbis deposed Gamaliel from office!

Like the Stoics, Epicureans, Neo-Platonists, Cynics, and the like, the rabbis lived their philosophy and borrowed both Greco-Roman philosophical garb and ideas to present their ideology as one that Jews would adhere to. In the early centuries of the rabbis, they consistently presented themselves as the type of intellectual group that Romans found comfortably familiar and respectable. Philosophers not only were distinctive in their modes of living and their dress, but they proudly advertised their intellectual lineage, by listing their teachers and their teachers’ teachers to all who came to hear them. Indeed, the rabbinic tractate *Pirke Avot* produced a similar “chain of rabbinic tradition” in order to buttress the intellectual fitness of Rabbi Yehoshua and the other disciples of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai to lead the rabbinic movement, in contrast to the dynastic succession of the Gamaliel family. In trotting out this “chain of tradition,” the Mishnah is actually adopting yet another Greco-Roman philosophical method.



CRATES THE PHILOSOPHER—MUSEO DELLA TERME, ROME

Pirke Avot opens its “chain of tradition” by stating,

Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua.

Joshua to the Elders.

The Elders to the Prophets.

The Prophets transmitted it to the men of the great assembly. . . .

Simeon the Righteous was among the remnant of the great assembly. . . .

Antigonus of Sokho received it from Simeon the Righteous. . . .

Yosé ben Yoezer of Tzerida and Yosé ben Yohanan of Jerusalem received it from them. . . .

Hillel and Shammai received it from them. . . .

Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai received it from them. . . .

Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai had five disciples. These were Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah, Rabbi Yosé the Priest, Rabbi Shimeon ben

First, I should point out that the very notion of a meritocracy in which socioeconomic class has little bearing is itself a democratic ideal of Hellenistic philosophy. That Yehoshua, an elderly charcoal maker, could engage in debate with a patrician like Gamaliel must have seemed outrageous to the younger rabbi. Yet among the Stoics of the Roman Empire, we find philosophers who are emperors, such as Marcus Aurelius, and philosophers who are slaves, such as Epictetus. Following the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, the Jews might have chosen to restore the power of the priesthood, a dynasty, or the power of the Davidic kingship, another dynasty. Instead, they opted for the power of Torah and intellectual endeavor—the most salient characteristic of Greco-Roman philosophy.

Many scholars think that Pirke Avot was once the capstone to the Mishnah and that this chain of tradition justified the rabbis' teaching of "Oral Torah," by tracing it back to God at Sinai. No doubt this is true, but there is much else at work in this text that might be characterized as rabbinic propaganda. I have virtually eliminated the content of what the ancients taught in favor of focusing on its form. The list above has been abbreviated—the two Yosés are actually the start of a listing of five "pairs" of pre-rabbinic leaders, culminating with the Elders, Hillel and Shammai. They, in turn, pass on the traditions to their disciple Yohanan ben Zakkai—the very rabbi who survived the siege of Jerusalem and brought his students to Yavneh. Rabbi Yohanan and his boys provided the political opposition to Gamaliel and his family. Ultimately, though, the dynasty won out—Rebbi Judah the Patriarch, editor of the Mishnah, was a direct descendant of Gamaliel. Given this battle with dynasty, it is notable that neither priests nor kings are mentioned in the chain of tradition. If anything, the priesthood is slyly co-opted by Rabbi Yohanan when he counts Rabbi Yosé the Priest among his disciples. Because the priesthood was scattered at the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple where they had once served, it was useful to claim them as among his disciples. It gave his disciple circle a certain standing and prestige.

This famous passage of Pirke Avot justifying rabbinic teaching actually displays a great deal of its Greco-Roman background. The text

famously begins, “Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua.” In fact, each successive generation “receives” the tradition and “transmits” it to the next generation. The use of *receive* and *transmit* is not merely the stuff of navy radiomen plying the oceans during World War II; it is technical terminology used in both the church and in the Greco-Roman philosophical schools for passing on the authentic teachings of the previous generation. Here, too, the rabbis have quietly declared that they stand within the Greco-Roman orbit. In fact, the very notion of a “chain of tradition” has its origins in the philosophical schools. There, when a new leader of a philosophical school took his place at the head of his disciples, he would produce such a chain, tracing his intellectual lineage back to the founder of that school. So, a Stoic like Marcus Aurelius might trace his academic pedigree back to Zeno; or an Epicurean might trace his lineage back to Epicurus.

Chains of tradition buttressing the right to rule the school were commonplace among the Greek philosophers. Each of these “chains” shares an odd common trait with the others: no matter what the actual chronology may be, each chain of tradition is fourteen links from the founder to the newest head of the academy. It does not make any difference whether those fourteen generations took one hundred years or five hundred years—accuracy in counting years is not the point. Getting from the newest head of the academy back to the founder of the school in but fourteen links is what it’s all about. This oddity also can be observed in the New Testament, where Jesus’s lineage is traced in groups of fourteen (father to son, rather than teacher to disciple). And were we to laboriously count out the chain from Moses at Sinai to Rabbi Yohanan and his disciples, we’d get the same magic number: fourteen. No one knows why fourteen seems to be the “correct” number of links, but Pirke Avot joins with all the philosophical schools in tracing its newest leader’s lineage back to the founder in fourteen generations.

Pirke Avot also has other affinities with Greco-Roman philosophy, specifically Stoicism. When Pirke Avot was formulated, around the turn of the third century CE, the ethos of the Roman Empire was broadly Stoic, much as we might characterize the American ethos today as one of liberal democracy. Stoics were famous for not showing

emotion and for being content with what they had. Yohanan ben Zakkai conducted a veritable philosophical session when he instructed his disciples:

“Go forth and see, what is the Good way a man should cling to?”

Rabbi Eliezer said, “Generosity [literally: a good eye].”

Rabbi Yehoshua said, “A good companion.”

Rabbi Yosé said, “A good neighbor.”

Rabbi Shimeon said, “One who sees that which is born.”

Rabbi Elazar said, “A good heart.”

Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai said, “I prefer Elazar’s answer, as his words include all that you say.”

My teacher Judah Goldin explained that the philosophy Rabbi Yohanan’s students exhibit here is classical Stoicism. “The Good” was a mainstay of Stoic philosophy, and the search for the Good was the task of the philosopher. Rabbi Yosé opted for good neighbors. Whom you lived among determined what you were; much as his contemporary, the Stoic thinker Epictetus, taught: “The key is to keep company only with people who uplift you, whose presence calls forth your best.”

In our bit of Pirke Avot, Rabbi Shimeon’s maxim that the Good way is “One who sees that which is born” is usually taken to mean that one should anticipate the consequences of his actions. To do so is good. To not do so is selfish and irresponsible. Rabbi Elazar has the last word and opts for a good heart. Among Greek philosophers as well as rabbis, there is a debate as to what one might find “in the heart.” For some, the heart was the seat of intellect, just as we today would locate it in our heads. For others, the heart was the place from which our emotions flowed. Whether cognitive or affective, the heart was an important organ in ancient thought. I suspect that the fact that the Midrash teaches us that Rabbi Elazar was Yohanan’s chief disciple and surrogate son may have influenced the master’s preference for his disciple’s maxim.

In Pirke Avot, the dialectic back and forth on the Good is followed

by a similar question-and-answer session on the Bad way, which must be avoided. Each disciple replies to his master with the negative of what he is recorded as saying above. Rabbi Shimeon, again the odd man out, says that the Bad is “to borrow and not repay.” This is surely true of one who does not recognize the consequences of his actions, and who is selfish and irresponsible. At the end of the dialogue, Pirke Avot makes clear that it has Stoic doctrine in mind, as Rabbi Elazar teaches (Pirke Avot 2:14), “Know how to refute an Epicurean (Greek: *epikurus*).”

The Stoics and Epicureans often debated one another in the marketplace or *agora* of the towns of the Greek-speaking East. They each believed in doing the Good, but for different reasons. For the most part, the Stoics believed in divine providence, which is to say that the gods cared what one did. By and large, Stoics counseled that one should strive to do the Good. Ironically, Epicureans, who are often caricatured as believing one should “eat, drink, and be merry,” also believed in striving for the Good. They differed from the Stoics in that they taught that the gods were utterly indifferent to humankind. There was neither judge nor judgment. This sharp sentiment led some to “eat, drink, and be merry,” but Epicurus and his Epicureans counseled that all else being equal, one may as well do good. This is not unlike the philosophy found at the end of the biblical book Ecclesiastes (12:13): “The end of the matter when all has been said: revere God and perform God’s commandments.”

To the rabbis, however, it was not only the outcome that mattered. Rabbis fervently believed that there was a judge, God, and that there would be judgment; be it on the High Holidays, when one’s deeds are weighed, or at the time of bodily resurrection, when all of one’s deeds are reviewed by God and appropriate reward or punishment is meted out. To say there was neither judge nor judgment was the ultimate blasphemy the rabbis could imagine. And so, Rabbi Elazar counseled, “Know how to refute an Epicurean.” Ultimately, the name Epicurus (Hebrew: *apikoros*) became an epithet for any Jewish heretic or blasphemer. In this passage of Pirke Avot, the rabbi’s disdain for Epicurean doctrine is explicit. Avot tilts decidedly in favor of Stoicism.

Epictetus, a Stoic philosopher and slave, teaches, “Wealth consists not in having great possessions, but in having few wants.” A good

thought for a slave to have, that! He also taught, “He is a wise man who does not grieve for the things which he has not, but rejoices for those which he has.” The rabbis teach this as a paradox in Pirke Avot (4:1): “Who is wealthy? One who is satisfied with his lot.” One more Epictetus quote also deserves our notice and comparison with Pirke Avot. He taught, “Keep silence for the most part, and speak only when you must, and then briefly.” Rabbi Shimeon, son of Rabbi Gamaliel and a contemporary of Epictetus, taught it this way: “All my life I was raised among the sages and I have found nothing better for myself than silence” (Pirke Avot 1:17).

The Greco-Roman Stoic philosophers also taught the value of self-control (*sophrosyne*). The late-second-century writer Philostratus, in his Greek work *The Lives of the Sophists*, says, “A prince is really superior if he controls his anger . . . if only it be kept in check by reason.” The rabbis seconded this virtue, and it becomes especially apparent when they apply their worldview to their model Moses, who famously had an anger-management problem. In his youth, Moses struck and killed an Egyptian (Ex. 2:12). Even as an elder leading Israel, Moses grew impatient as he tried to produce water for the Israelites in the wilderness and struck the rock, rather than speak to it as God had commanded (Num. 20:11).

In the earliest rabbinic commentary to the book of Numbers (Sifre #157), Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah notes that in three places Moses gave in to his anger and as a result forgot his “Torah.” The consequence of Moses’s loss of self-control was forgetfulness and error in the law. These two phenomena are interlinked, because for the rabbis the law is Oral Torah, which is memorized. If anger causes one to forget, it causes one to err in teaching. That any rabbi might consider that Moses, the lawgiver, could have erred in his teaching, is a sure sign of how highly the rabbis valued the Greek virtues of self-control (*sophrosyne*) and avoidance of anger (*a-pathia*). Rabbinic teachings conformed very closely to Stoic virtues, even to the extent that the rabbis, like the Stoics, sought to refute Epicureans.

The Stoic Epictetus also taught, “We are like travelers at an inn or guests at a stranger’s table.” A similar sentiment is attributed to the rabbis’ “founding father” Hillel the Elder, in this *chreia* recorded in a fifth-century rabbinic commentary to Leviticus (34:3) that I quoted

earlier:

Hillel was once taking leave of his disciples and preparing to go on his way when they asked him, “Master, where are you going?”

Hillel replied, “To do a good turn for the guest [Greek: *ksenos*] who is staying at my home.”

They asked, “Do you then have a guest [*ksenos*] every day?”

He replied, “Is not my poor soul a guest [*ksenos*] in my body? One day it is here and on the morrow it will be gone.”

Epictetus might be speaking about the transitory nature of life in general. But for Hillel, as well as the rabbis who came after him, body and soul were distinct entities, with the pure soul being eternal. The earliest rabbinic commentary on Exodus (Mekilta, Beshalach 2, p. 125, restored with Leviticus Rabbah 4:5) imagines the following conversation:

The Emperor Antoninus asked Our Holy Rabbi [Judah the Patriarch]: “When a person dies and the body decays, will the Blessed Holy One resurrect him for judgment?”

He replied, “Do not ask me only about the body, which is impure, but rather ask about the soul, which is pure. It may be analogized to a king of flesh and blood who had an orchard, within which were beautiful young figs. He set two guards therein, one lame and one blind, that they might guard it.

“He said to them, ‘Be careful of the fruit.’ Then he left them and went on his way. The lame one said to the blind one, ‘I see beautiful young figs.’ The other one said, ‘Let’s eat!’

“The first one said, ‘Can I walk?’ The blind one said, ‘And can I see?’ What did they do? The lame one rode on the back of the blind one and so they took the fruits and

ate them. Then they each went and sat in their original places.

“Some days later the king came and asked them, ‘Where are my fruits?’ The blind one said to him, ‘Can I see?’ The lame one said to him, ‘Can I walk?’ The king, who was wily, what did he do? He made the lame one ride on the back of the blind one and tortured them together. He said, ‘Thus did you eat them!’

“So, in the Coming Future, the Holy will say to the soul, ‘Why did you sin against Me?’ She will say to God, ‘Master of the Universe, was it I who sinned against you? It was the body that sinned, for from the day I have departed from it, have I sinned at all?’

“God will ask the body, ‘Why did you sin?’ The body will say to God, ‘Master of both worlds, it was the soul that sinned, for from the day she has departed from me, am I not tossed out like a potsherd on a garbage heap?’

“What will the Blessed Holy One do? God will restore the soul to the body and judge them as one.”

This story teaches us a number of aspects of rabbinic philosophy: belief in the world to come when there will be bodily resurrection of the dead, subsequent judgment, and punishment for sins committed. The body and soul are judged together for the sins they commit as one, yet the soul is deemed pure, while the body is not. That said, despite privileging the soul, the great rabbi holds the soul culpable for sin.

It is perhaps not coincidence that the metaphor of the blind and lame is found in the Byzantine collection called *The Greek Anthology*. Once again the rabbis shared an image with the Greco-Roman world. But in this instance, the narrative about the blind and lame guards is uniquely applied by the rabbis as a metaphor for the relationship of body and soul, while in the Greek text it is simply a metaphor for synergy. The tables are turned when the good rabbi instructs the philosopher emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus on the intricacies of the relationship of body and soul.

Thus far I have shared texts in which the rabbis imagine conversations between Rabbi Judah the Patriarch and the philosopher emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus. The rabbis also quote Homer, who is not exactly a philosopher, and we have seen them mention Epicurus, who is. But the rabbis catch us all by surprise when they name Oenomaus of Gadara as one of the greatest of Roman philosophers. Oenomaus was an actual philosopher who lived in the second century in the Northeast of the province of Roman Palestine, in the town of Gadara—a Greek-speaking city. In truth, Oenomaus was quite obscure. His work is briefly quoted by the church father Eusebius, and later St. Jerome lists him in a chronicle. He apparently wrote a work titled “On Philosophy according to Homer.” The rabbis list him among “the greatest philosophers,” most likely because they knew him as a boy from the neighborhood.

But what about Plato, the man who truly was the greatest Greco-Roman philosopher? The rabbis never quote him by name. This may indicate that the rabbis did not study in depth the abstract thought of the Greek sages. On the other hand, they did know certain ideas from Plato. These were probably gleaned from the writings of the first-century Alexandrian Jewish sage Philo. Philo quotes Plato in his work “On the Creation of the World.”

In that book, Philo reworks ideas from Plato’s *Timaeus*. Plato suggested that in order for the universe to be created, an ideal form had to be imagined first. Only afterward could the “ideal” be concretized into reality. Philo, in turn, explains Plato’s philosophy by likening it to a king who hires an architect to build a great city. The architect first sketches his plan in wax, and only after that does he build. Philo goes on to suggest that this is how God created the universe.

In the fifth century CE, the rabbis comment on the creation story of Genesis with this analogy:

The Torah says, “I was the artisanal tool of the blessed Holy One.” In the way of the world, when a human king builds a palace [Greek: *palatin*], he does not build it of his own knowledge, but uses the knowledge of an artisan. And the artisan does not build it of his own knowledge, but has

parchments [*diphtheraot*] and wax tablets [*pinaksot*] to know how to make the mosaics [*psayphosim*]. Thus the blessed Holy One looked in the Torah and then created the world.

The rabbis seem to depend upon Philo and/or Plato for their analogy. God etches forms onto wax, as Philo suggests his architect might do. Indeed, the rabbis' artisan might well be an architect, although I think it more likely that it is the artist who lays down mosaic floors, and I have translated accordingly. No matter whether we translate the text as being about an architect per se or about a mosaicist, the Platonic ideal has now been "read into" the biblical creation story. Sweetest of all, the Platonic ideal for the rabbis is the Torah itself.

We've all heard about that other Platonic ideal: the so-called platonic relationship. My father, may he rest in peace, used to remind me that it was ideal, not real. Like the rabbis, my dad loved to pun; so he would say of such a romanticized notion of nonerotic platonic love between the sexes, "For him it's play, for her it's tonic."

Plato and my dad's observations are a good introduction to both Roman and rabbinic images of women. Being my father's son, I want to see if we can put the "Roman" in romantic. The rabbis certainly could imagine romance; but they were quite practical about taking a Platonic ideal and protecting it through well-grounded realities of rabbinic law. Indeed, they were in accord with Greco-Roman realism when it came to the hard-nosed negotiation of a prenuptial agreement. Both Greco-Roman and rabbinic cultures were male dominated; and women were expected to play their roles in the home (thank you very much, ladies). Men were decidedly at an advantage in contracting marriage. And men often were intemperate when it came to constructing images of their wives. After hearing the men of Late Antiquity describe their spouses, I imagine that people commented to the women, "Funny, you don't look shrewish."

Plato's teacher, Socrates, supposedly had a shrewish wife named Xanthippe. Shakespeare, in *The Taming of the Shrew*, compared his protagonist Katherina with her:

Be she as foul as was Florentius' love,
as old as Sibyl, and as curst and shrewd
as Socrates' Xanthippe or a worse . . .

Just how bad was Xanthippe? In the third century CE, Diogenes Laertius recalls this anecdote or *chreia* in his *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*: “When Xanthippe first scolded him and then drenched him with water, Socrates’ rejoinder was, ‘Did I not say that Xanthippe’s thunder would end in rain?’” Aelian, in the third century CE, reports, “Alcibiades sent Socrates a large and beautifully made cake. Xanthippe was annoyed in her usual way . . . so she emptied it out of the basket and trod on it.” Or again, Diogenes Laertius:

When Xanthippe tore his coat off his back in the market place, his acquaintances encouraged him to hit back; “By Zeus!” he said, “So that while we fight you may cheer, ‘Good, Socrates!’ ‘Well done, Xanthippe?!’ ”

This cavalier misogyny is fairly typical of Hellenistic literature of the period. Sadly, it is mirrored in rabbinic stories. Here is one about Rabbi Yosé of Galilee and *his* wife, told in the fifth-century Midrash Leviticus Rabbah (34:14):

Rabbi Yosé the Galilean had a shrewish wife who used to scold him in front of his students. They said to him, “Rabbi, divorce her as she does not honor you.”

He said to them, “Her bride-price [*pherne*] is more than I can afford, so I cannot divorce her.”

Once he was studying with Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah. When they had finished their studies Rabbi Yosé said, “Would the Master attend to me by coming to my home?” He replied, “Yes.”

When they entered his house, she turned her face away from them and left them. Rabbi Yosé saw a pot on the stove. He asked his wife, “Is there something in the pot?”

She replied, “Stewed fruit.” Yet when he lifted the lid he

found a chicken fricassee. Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah knew what he had heard. He asked him, “Did she not say ‘stewed fruit,’ yet there is chicken?”

Rabbi Yosé replied, “It’s a miracle!”

When they had finished eating he said, “Master, divorce your wife, for she does not honor you.”

He replied, “Her bride-price [*pherne*] is too much and I cannot afford it.”

Rabbi Elazar said, “We will raise the funds for her bride-price [*pherne*] so you may divorce her.”

They collected the bride-price [*pherne*] and he sent her away.

Four times in this short narrative about Rabbi Yosé and his wife, her bride-price is mentioned. Each time, the Greek term *pherne* is used in place of the common Hebrew term *ketubah*, which reflects the legal situation in the time of Rabbi Yosé. In Jewish law, a woman’s bride-price must be paid if her husband seeks divorce. Indeed, her dowry principal must also be restored, which gave women some bit of financial protection. The entire financial package is referred to in our Midrash by the Greek term *pherne*, which the later rabbis used to represent the two separate legal obligations: one of the bride-price given to her by her new husband as a marriage gift, the other of the dowry she brought into the marriage. Both sets of funds were hers, but her husband could benefit from any proceeds earned from their value during the marriage. Perhaps the requirement to restore the wife’s capital to her control offered a woman some protection from abrupt divorce.

In rabbinic law, the right to initiate divorce remained the province of men. In Roman law, by contrast, women were granted the right to initiate divorce. The rabbis themselves recognized this difference when they wrote (Gen. Rabba 18:5): “Rabbi Yohanan says, ‘Among the gentiles . . . his wife divorces him, she gives him a *repudium*.’” The Latin term, transliterated by the rabbis into Hebrew for the wife’s repudiation of her husband, is attested in both Greek and Latin documents from that era. In the early 1960s, Israeli archeologists

uncovered a stash of letters dating from the second century CE at Nahal Hever, a few miles south of the Dead Sea. Written on papyrus, they are mostly in Greek, with a few Aramaic and Nabatean letters thrown in for good measure. The texts, from the cleverly titled “Cave of Letters,” are a treasure trove of information about the lives of Jewish women in Roman antiquity. A Jewish woman named Babatha left behind her personal archive, which dates from 120 to 132 CE. We also have papyri that document the life of her contemporary Salome Komaise. In both cases, these women rely on Greco-Roman rather than early rabbinic forms for their marriage documents. That way, they were better protected than was Rabbi Yosé’s poor wife. So it is noteworthy that the rabbis use the Greek term *pherne*, even as they refer to their own rabbinic marriage stipulations.

Under both Roman and Jewish law, as indicated by the documents Babatha and Salome left behind, women were granted alimony—literally, a food allowance. In cases of Jewish law, a dead husband’s estate was directed to his offspring, and so their mothers conceivably might not be provided for beyond her bride-price and dowry. In such cases courts were called upon to determine appropriate alimony. It was presumed that a woman’s *pherne* provided her needs, while the children would be provided for by their father’s estate. The Jerusalem Talmud (Ketubot 5:7) reports a marvelous story of a wealthy woman who came before a rabbinic court to sue for her right to continue to be provided for in “the style to which she had become accustomed.”

A case is cited regarding Martha bat Boethius. The sages ruled that she could receive two barrels of wine as daily alimony. . . .

Rabbi Hezekiah quoted Rabbi Abbahu in the name of Rabbi Yohanan, “They also ruled about a daily cooked-food allowance.”

Despite this, she cursed the court, saying, “You should only give this to your own daughters!”

Rabbi Akhah said, “We all replied to her, ‘Amen!’”

I am suspicious that this story is not an actual court case but, rather, a

rabbinic fiction or even a joke, given the “amen” punch line at the end of the narrative. In the papyrus documents left at Nahal Hever, we learn that Babatha, too, sued for her food allowance. Martha bat Boethius was a possibly fictional character known in rabbinic storytelling for her fabulous wealth, while Babatha was a decidedly real woman who left actual Greek court documents behind.

Although the rabbis do not like to admit it, there were plenty of real Jews like Babatha who paid little to no attention to rabbinic family law, choosing rather to take their chances in Roman courts. Indeed, many of those Jews had non-Jewish spouses, so the Roman court was a preferable venue, as the rabbis recognized only marriage between two Jews as binding under their purview. Even so, the question remained as to how the rabbis might view the offspring of a mixed union. Earlier in this book we read about an errant student who ruled in Tyre that the offspring of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother could be circumcised on Shabbat. This was tantamount to declaring the baby wholly Jewish, as only for a Jew could the command for circumcision on the eighth day (Gen. 17:12) take precedence over the command to observe the Sabbath (Ex. 20:10). Unfortunately, that student got rabbinic law wrong and was whipped by his rabbi.

Yet the boy had a point. The Torah consistently follows the tribal identification of the father—what is called patrilineal descent. Josephus, writing in Greek in the late first century CE, also assumes that the offspring of a marriage between a Jewish father and a Gentile mother is Jewish. Philo, for his part (and in this he finds support from later rabbis in Babylonia), considers such a child to be illegitimate, using the Greek term *nothos*, often translated as “bastard.”

It is only from the time of the Mishnah (ca. 200 CE) onward that the rabbis become zealous in their insistence that Judaism follows the religion of the mother, and not the father—what is called matrilineal descent. For the rabbis—even Orthodox and Conservative rabbis today—a child’s Judaism is determined by the Judaism of its mother. We know *when* the shift occurred—sometime between the first and second centuries—but we are not at all sure *why* it shifted.

My colleague, historian Shaye J. D. Cohen, notes that in Roman law, the citizenship of a child follows that of its father, much as was

the case for Jewish identity in the biblical era. But under Roman law, when a marriage does not have formal legal status, then the child's Roman identity follows that of the mother. Cohen suggests that this law, promulgated just before the editorial date of the Mishnah, is a possible source of origin for the matrilineal principle in Judaism. He suggests that this law of Roman citizenship, which was matrilineal, was transferred to the rabbis' consideration of who is a Jew. Given that Cohen's only other suggestion for the shift comes from the principles of animal husbandry, I find this a considerably more tasteful attribution.

Of course, we expect that children are cared for by both of their parents. But in the Roman and rabbinic worlds, men had stronger standing in court and so could better represent their children's legal and financial interests. A woman and child both needed a designated guardian in the absence of the *pater familias*. Such a guardian was called, in both Roman and rabbinic documents, by the Greek term *epitropos*. The term in Roman law describes the court-appointed legal guardian who is the curator of the finances and well-being of the minor. The *epitropos* can also be the estate and financial agent who cares for the property of others. This was especially important when women owned property, as they were often not legally allowed to act on their own behalf. In those instances the Roman court or the rabbis would appoint an *epitropos* to serve as business or real-estate agents on the woman's behalf. Yet the term can also refer to an imperial office, such as that of the Roman procurator. A Roman law from the beginning of the third century uses the term referring to Jews, as it tries to determine their status in serving in imperial offices and Roman court-ordered guardianships. It reads, "Jews as well shall serve as *epitropos* to non-Jews, just as they are required to perform the other services . . ." At least until the advent of Christianity, Jews held legal status on a par with other citizens of the empire.

In rabbinic literature the term *epitropos* is simply transliterated from Greek and is preserved in both the Talmuds. The Babylonian Talmud (Bava Metsia 39a) speaks of a "court-appointed *epitropos*." The Palestinian Talmud (Terumot 1:1, 40b) distinguishes between a permanent and temporary *epitropos*. The Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 121a) also makes reference to an imperial *epitropos*. But the elasticity

of the term in rabbinic literature is piquantly captured by the lament, “There is no guardian [*epitropos*] against unchastity.” Apparently, even in the ancient world, when a young couple is bent on making whoopee, no chaperone can stop them.

There seems to have been a good deal of rabbinic family law, even some laws that stand in contrast to the prevailing Roman norms, such as those regarding divorce initiation. Influence is a complex phenomenon, for even as Roman legal tendencies may have penetrated rabbinic jurisprudence, the Roman rulers nevertheless may have sought to limit rabbinic jurisdiction in favor of their own imperial authority. Professor Amnon Linder suggests that “the Jewish leadership had enjoyed a considerable judicial autonomy”; but he also thinks that it all came crashing down when the Roman emperor Arcadius issued a law called an imperial *constitution* in 398 CE, limiting Jewish authorities to passing judgment only on “matters of religion.” Everything else came under the purview of the Roman authorities.

Professor Jill Harries, by contrast, writing about the same exact imperial *constitution*, emphasizes the section of the law that permits two Jews to engage in “arbitration before Jews or Patriarchs . . . with the consent of both parties . . . in civil matters.” In fact, the law concludes by stating that not only is this permissible, but that “the governors of the provinces shall even execute their sentences as if they were appointed arbiters by the [Roman] judges.” This reading buttresses the impression we get from rabbinic literature itself: The rabbis had the ability to judge cases in family law and other civil matters, so long as both parties were Jews who were willing to submit to the rabbis’ jurisdiction. According to Harries, this situation persisted even after the emperor Arcadius’s ruling of 398 CE.

There were, however, severe limitations placed upon Jewish legal decisions outside of civil cases. It is generally assumed that the rabbis and other Jewish jurists were denied the possibility of carrying out executions for either capital crimes or biblical sins. This, of course, does not rule out possible mob violence; but rabbinic insistence on the rule of law certainly precluded any Jewish court from actually turning a convict over to a mob for execution. I like to think this was also true when the Second Temple was still standing. But any evidence we

might have about the limitations of a Jewish court is made vastly more complicated by Christian testimony about mob violence. St. Paul claims to have taken part in a mob stoning of St. Stephen before the former's conversion to Christianity.

Christian literature also skews our understanding of early first-century Jewish law with its depiction of the complicity of the Jewish Sanhedrin with the Roman court in the trial of Jesus. To state the obvious: these accounts are tainted with religious prejudice. I confess to my own pro-Jewish and pro-rabbinic bias in this theological minefield, as well. Nevertheless, the early Christian accounts open the door to the possibility that the Jewish court may have convicted Jesus but then left it to the Roman authorities to execute him, as the New Testament reports. Given that Romans readily used crucifixion as a punishment and that Jewish courts do not permit that form of execution, this passes the test of plausibility.

I am not going to pursue this extremely complicated issue here, in part because this book is not about Jewish-Christian relations and in part because I am content to stipulate that Jewish courts, whether pre-rabbinic or those of the rabbis of Roman Palestine, did not perform executions. The rabbis did spend a great deal of time talking about capital cases. Why go to the trouble of laying out in detail the four methods of execution a Jewish court might employ? Why describe the appeals process and the use of the town crier (Greek: *kayruks*) to announce an impending execution? Why such excruciating detail if the Romans did not permit any of these hypothetical executions in the first place?

We might equally well ask why so much rabbinic literature obsesses over details of the Jerusalem Temple: its procedures, layout, and rituals. A significant proportion of the Mishnah relates to Jewish laws that apply only to the Temple—such as sacrifice, priestly purities, priestly dues such as tithing, and such—although the Jerusalem Sanctuary was destroyed in 70 CE, never to be rebuilt. One simple explanation of the rabbis' attention to things that existed only in theory—which applies both to the Temple and to the death sentence—may simply be that they had a strong penchant for Torah study. The central book of the Torah, Leviticus, is chock-full of the procedures of

the Temple and priesthood that take up so much of the rabbis' exegetical concern. Which is to say: the rabbis regularly made pronouncements about the things they studied about in Scripture. You cannot read the Pentateuch without noticing that it pronounces execution as a penalty for certain sins, again and again. Here, too, the rabbis' seeming obsession with death-penalty proceedings may stem more from rabbinic proclivity for Midrash and biblical interpretation than from any historic reality or theoretical desire to execute.

In fact, the rabbis were scrupulous not only about interpretation, but also about fulfilling the Torah's commandments regarding "justice, justice shall you pursue" (Deut. 16:20). As the rabbis read the repetition of the word "justice" in the verse, they understood it to mean that they were always required to use just means in their pursuit of justice. This meant that the rabbis had great respect for what we now would call "rule of law," and that they took care to set up courts to adjudicate disputes in the Jewish community wherever possible. At the same time, the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmud each offer abundant testimony that the rabbis depended on case law, however messy and unruly such a system might be. In this they shared a worldview with their Roman pagan neighbors. Law as practiced in the courts and communities was the best precedent for adjudication. It is not coincidence that the rabbinic courts (theoretically ranging in size from local tribunals of three rabbinic judges to larger trials, which could involve twenty-three or even seventy-one elders) were all called Sanhedrin, using the common Greek term for a council or senate: *synhedrion*.

The historian Polybius, writing in Greek in the second century BCE, uses the term *synhedrion* to refer to the Roman Senate—and that's back when the Senate was still the Senate, before the advent of an emperor. Once there was an emperor, "first among equals" in the Senate, *synhedrion* referred to the emperor's executive committee, which effectively stood above the Senate. The New Testament refers repeatedly to the Jerusalem *synhedrion* as a Jewish institution. The rabbis, in turn, styled their courts Sanhedrins. In fact, this term became so closely associated with Jewish courts that we find that the Roman legal compendium called the Theodosian code refers to "the Primates of the Jews . . . who are nominated in the Sanhedrins of Palestine."

This Theodosian law also refers to payment to the imperial treasury of an annual tax collected by the *palatini*. From the context here it is clear that a *palatini* was some kind of treasury or tax official. A passage in Midrash Leviticus Rabbah, composed in Roman Palestine around the same time, explains a verse from Jeremiah that is still read in synagogues as the prophetic portion on the second day of Rosh HaShannah, the Jewish New Year:

“Truly Ephraim is a dear child of mine” (Jer. 31:18). What is the meaning of “Ephraim” in this verse? Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said, *Palatini*. Rabbi Yehoshua b. Nehemiah said, *Eugenestatos*.

Palatini are the court officials, those of the palace. The second term, *eugenestatos*, means “very well-born,” like the English term *eugenic*. The Greek word meaning “very well-born” might equally well be translated as “nobility.” For each of the rabbis quoted above, to be called “Ephraim” was to have very high status in the Greek-speaking Roman East.

Sometimes rabbis found themselves in Roman courts, and not always as unbiased observers. I imagine this was no more welcome to the Jews of the Roman Empire than it would be for a member of a racial or ethnic minority today to find himself or herself in the clutches of the legal system.

In a third-century companion text to the Mishnah we read:

The story is told that Rabbi Eliezer was once arrested for heresy and they took him to the tribunal [*bema*] for judgment. The governor [*hegemon*] asked him, “Was a grey-hair like you involved in such idle matters?”

Rabbi Eliezer replied, “I put my faith in the Judge.”

Now that *hegemon* thought that he was referring to himself, while Rabbi Eliezer was referring to his Father in Heaven. So he said, “Since you have put your faith in me, I shall do so for you. . . . Dismissed [*dimissus*]; you are released.”

When he was released from the tribunal he remained troubled that he had been arrested for heresy. . . . Rabbi Aqiba asked him, “Perhaps one of the heretics said something that pleased you?”

Rabbi Eliezer replied, “By Heavens, you have reminded me! Once I was walking on the main street [*istrata*] of Sepphoris and Jacob of Sikhnin quoted a heretical teaching of Jesus son of the Panther [*pantiri*], and it pleased me. That is why I was arrested, for I transgressed the words of Torah to “keep its ways far from you.” (Prov. 5:8)

This late-first-century rabbi was arrested on suspicion of being Christian at the time when Christianity was still a proscribed religion in the Roman Empire. Hauled up to the tribunal, the governor serving as judge seeks to entrap him. Rabbi Eliezer’s wily yet evasive answer is sufficient for the judge to dismiss the case. At the very same time, the younger Pliny served as the Roman emperor’s representative in Asia Minor. He wrote to the emperor Trajan,

I have never been present at a trial of Christians. . . . I am not sure . . . whether a pardon ought to be granted to anyone who retracts his belief. . . . I have asked them in person if they are Christians . . . if they persist I order them to be led away for execution.

These were the stakes that Rabbi Eliezer faced. Note the incidence of Greek and Latin terminology in this rabbinic account: *bema*, *hegemon*, *dimissus*, *istrata*, *pantiri*. The happy term *dimissus*, the one Latin word among all the Greek, comes straight from Roman court pronouncements.

A brief word also is in order on the crude rabbinic nickname for Jesus, who is called here “son of the Panther.” This is a double slur, as it denies both the virgin birth and the paternity of Joseph, while it imagines Jesus’s parent as a Roman soldier or local tough. The nickname “Panther” is known from Roman graffiti and is a term akin

to a 1950s American nickname such as “Duke” or “Rocky.” Local Greek slang was used by the rabbis when they wanted to take a cheap shot at Christianity.

Another rabbinic narrative offers “a detailed and faithful portrayal of the procedure in the criminal court.” For this portrayal, as well as the story of Rabbi Eliezer we have just discussed, I follow my teacher Saul Lieberman.

In the fifth-century Galilean Midrash *Pesikta DeRav Kahana* (24:10), we read:

“For My plans are not your plans, nor are My ways your ways, proclaims the Lord” (Isa. 55:8). This is like the case of a robber [*lystes*] who is tortured by the interrogator [*questionarius*]. First he reads his deposition [*elogium*]; then he whips him; then he gives him the hook [*khamos*]; then he pronounces the sentence [*periculum*]; and then he is taken for execution.

This gruesome description is an all-too-accurate account of testimony under torture in the Roman court system. Again, the rabbinic accounting is chock-full of the Greek terms heard in the Roman courts in the East. The deposition from the original arrest record is entered into testimony, and if the defendant continues to proclaim innocence, he is tortured. First comes the flogging of the defendant’s back, then the hook in his mouth. The Roman historian Tacitus offers proof of this horrific procedure when he writes that Emperor Tiberius was dragged to the Tiber River by the hook in his mouth and dumped into the river to drown. The same fate was meted out to Emperor Commodus: “The people and the senate demanded that his body be dragged with the hook and cast into the Tiber,” according to the testimony of the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*. We are left with little doubt that the rabbinic description is not a fiction but an actual horror.

The Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 32a) promotes the spiritual value of confession of sins, especially before death. When they think of confession under that type of mortal duress, they compare it to a Roman court:

Our Rabbis taught: if one falls sick and his life is in danger, he is told, “Make confession, for all who are sentenced to death make confession.” When a man goes out into the street, let him imagine that he is given in charge of an officer [*strateitos*]; when he has a headache, let him imagine that he is put in irons [*kollarion*]; when he takes to bed, let him imagine that he ascended the scaffold [Lat. *gradum*] to be punished. For whoever ascends the scaffold to be punished, if he has great advocates [*parakletos*] he is saved, but if not he is not saved. And these are man’s advocates: repentance and good deeds.

In the course of the fourth century CE, Christians went from being a persecuted minority to ruling the empire and doing so with vigor. By the fifth century, Christian Roman rulers had legislated against and subsequently persecuted those Christians whom the Catholic Church deemed to be heretics. It would not be long before imperial legislation turned toward what it saw as the problem of the Jews. Technically, this move is beyond the purview of this book, as we are more concerned about the relationships of the Jews with pagan Rome; and I am trying to avoid writing about Jewish-Christian relations. But because the Roman law codes, like rabbinic compendia of law, contain a long historical record, I will close this chapter with a brief look at how Roman law codes influenced the lives of Jews through legislation on synagogues in the Roman Empire.

Two *constitutions* from the Theodosian code, most likely promulgated in 420 and 423 CE, concern the Jewish community. The first echoes Pliny’s concerns about Christians but this time applied to the Jewish communities of the empire.

No one shall be accused and punished for merely being a Jew if they are innocent of any other crime. Nor should any religion execute him if he is but exposed to insult. Their synagogues and homes shall not be burnt nor wrongfully damaged without reason . . . just as we provide this law for all the Jews, we offer the opinion that this

warning should be given lest the Jews themselves grow insolent; and elated by their security commit some act against the reverence of Christianity.

This is an example of how one hand gives while the other takes away. The wording of this law indicates that by 420 there were mob actions against Jewish communities in the East, resulting in the torching of synagogues and beating of Jews. The law prohibited these actions, “without reason,” which unfortunately left a very wide loophole. Further, it warned the Jewish community not to get too uppity, given the thinness of this cover of imperial protection.

The two-edged nature of this law was made even clearer in the subsequent law, issued two and a half years later. It directly concerned the synagogues that had been damaged or destroyed in Christian mob riots against some Jewish communities.

In the future none of the synagogues of the Jews shall be seized or put on fire. If there are some synagogues that were seized or given over to churches or consecrated to the ancient mysteries in a recent undertaking after the law [of 420, above] was passed; they shall be given new places in exchange on which to build, to the measure of the synagogues taken. . . . No synagogue shall be constructed from now on, and the old ones shall remain in their current condition.

This *constitution* marks the descent into Byzantine Christendom and what would become the ongoing degradation of Judaism and Jewish institutions throughout the Middle Ages. While synagogues that were burned were, in theory, guaranteed replacement according to the architectural footprint of the previous building, it was ruled that other synagogues remain in the state in which they existed and not be improved or repaired. Further, new building of synagogues was expressly forbidden.

Archeological remains reveal that this law was, fortunately, not enforced, as a building boom of synagogues took place throughout the

Galilee and also in Asia Minor. To state what now should be expected, these Jewish buildings were designed and erected very much to the norms and influences of local Greco-Roman architecture. Let's take a look.

Note

* There are 2,711 folios in the standard printed editions of the Babylonian Talmud. That yields 5,422 print pages.

History Where It Happened

My wife loves New York City architecture, old and new. One year as a Hanukkah gift I bought her an architectural guide of the city, arranged by neighborhood. She has systematically walked her way through Manhattan, block by block. The practice has given her lots of exercise and a real appreciation for the built beauties of the city. In this chapter I'd like to take a similar stroll with you, touring the Roman Empire of the early centuries CE, observing the ruins of ancient Jewish buildings—their common features and the things that make one stand apart from another. I'll report what my wife and I have seen as we have visited these archeological sites together over the years, and even share a photo or two along the way.

Far and away, the best place to begin is at the greatest Jewish building ever. The Second Temple in Jerusalem was one of the “wonders of the Roman world,” a magnificent structure built by King Herod, beginning in the first century BCE. A client-king of the Roman emperor Augustus, Herod was an Idumean convert to Judaism. The Greek name for the territory that was biblical Edom—Idumea—was Esau's old province, which the rabbis identified with Rome. Herod himself was thoroughly Hellenized and thoroughly bonkers. Herod was obsessed with building magnificent Greco-Roman architecture

throughout his small kingdom in the Land of Israel. And in fits of paranoia, he murdered members of his immediate family. This gave rise to the *chreia* attributed to Emperor Augustus about Herod's Jewish piety in not eating pork, which ends with the punch line, "It is better to be Herod's pig than his son."

Herod spared no expense at remodeling the Second Temple, essentially rebuilding it as a classical Greco-Roman shrine. He widened the esplanade upon which it stood, adding colonnades, arches, and endless gilt, perhaps to assuage his own guilt over murdering his family. Among the Jerusalem Temple features worthy of notice—beyond the kitschy gold overlays—were the monumental ceremonial eastern gates made of Corinthian bronze. Imported from Alexandria by ship, the Nicanor gates, like the rest of the Temple, are lost to us forever. Just how amazing were the Nicanor gates? The Babylonian Talmud (Yoma 38a) reports that

Miracles were wrought for the Nicanor gates. . . . They say that when Nicanor went to bring the gates from Alexandria, a storm arose upon his return and threatened to drown the gates. They took one of the gates and threw it overboard to lighten the load, but the sea continued to storm. When they went to throw the matching gate overboard, Nicanor wrapped himself around it and said, "Then throw me in with it!" The sea immediately became calm.

He nonetheless was troubled about the one gate that had been lost. But when they came to port at Acco, there it was bobbing next to the boat! Some say a sea creature swallowed it and then spat it out onto dry land . . .

When they changed all the gates of the Temple to gold, they kept the Nicanor gates untouched because of the miracle . . . but there are those who say it was because the bronze shined like gold in any case.

I assume that Mr. Nicanor was the donor of the miraculous gates. Let's give him extra credit for attentive stewardship of his naming gift.

In addition to these magnificent gates, Herod's Temple featured secret passageways for the priests, grand stairways for the Levites to array themselves upon for their choral singing, and arches to buttress the entire architectural assemblage. Below is a photo of what is now called "Robinson's arch," the scant remnants of such a buttress. Note the detail of the immense ashlars—stones that are trimmed or embossed around the edges. This was a featured style of Herod's stonecutters and is still visible at the Western Wall, or Wailing Wall, in Jerusalem. The Wall, as it is now called, was part of the retaining wall holding up the enlarged plaza where Herod's Temple stood. That plaza is referred to as the Temple Mount, or, for Muslims: Haram al-Sharif, the noble sanctuary.



REMNANTS OF ROBINSON'S ARCH WITH DETAIL OF TRIMMED HERODIAN STONE

There are other monuments of the Herodian era near the Temple Mount. The so-called Tomb of Absalom is to the east, nestled in the Kidron Valley between the Temple esplanade and the Mount of Olives. You can gaze down upon it from the churches there as you look

toward the fabled Jerusalem skyline of al-Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock. While the monument presumably is named after David's rebellious son Absalom (2 Sam. 18:18), the tomb is replete with Ionic columns and a Doric frieze, and so most probably was built in the first century CE, a thousand years after biblical Absalom's death.

Perhaps the most fascinating architectural works from this late Second Temple period are the building remains identified as synagogues. This is curious, since during this period the Jerusalem Temple was still standing, so one might expect it to have been the exclusive place of worship for the Jews. Yet the Babylonian Talmud (Ketubot 105a) reports that "there were 394 . . . synagogues in Jerusalem," before the destruction. Until the archeologists unearthed their finds, historians had assumed this to be another Talmudic fantasy.

Although there are no actual synagogue remains from the Second Temple period in Jerusalem, archeologists discovered what they call Theodotus's synagogue inscription. Here is an English translation from the original, which is inscribed not in Hebrew, but Greek:

Theodotus, [son] of Vettenus, priest and leader of the synagogue [*archisynagogos*], son of an *archisynagogos*, grandson of an *archisynagogos*, built the synagogue for the reading of the law and the teaching of the commandments, and the guest-chamber and the rooms and the water installations for lodging for those needing them from abroad, which his fathers, the elders and Simonides founded.

Note that the inscription does *not* say that it was a place of prayer. Presumably, prayer went along with sacrifice in the nearby Jerusalem Temple. Or maybe it was assumed that the synagogue was so obviously a place of prayer that this function need not be recorded in the dedicatory inscription.

While there are no physical remains of the Theodotus synagogue, there is archeological evidence of other predestruction synagogues outside of Jerusalem. Herodian, a fortress built by the mad king for

whom it is named, is visible from Jerusalem and is less than a day's walk away. One of the buildings within the fortress complex has been identified by archeologists as a first-century, predestruction synagogue. Even further south, near the shores of the Dead Sea, stands the famous mountain redoubt of Masada. It, too, presumably had a synagogue. The excavators of these and another site (Gamla, discussed below) identified the rectangular rooms, each with sets of columns and, most telling, benches that line the walls, as Second Temple-era synagogues.

Recently a synagogue was unearthed at Migdal/Magdala, in the north, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee—also dated to the Second Temple period. There, excavators discovered a large carved stone with a bas relief of a menorah and urns. This makes Migdal the outlier among the other so-called Second Temple-era synagogues, as it also has partial frescoes on its walls and remnants of mosaic floors. None of the other synagogues from that early period have pictorial art or decoration. Like the other presumed synagogues, Migdal has benches lining the main room.

There is general agreement that the site at Gamla in the Galilee is also a synagogue from that early period. Josephus, writing in the late first century, describes the town as a center of the rebellion against Rome in 66–70 CE:

Gamla would not surrender, relying . . . upon the natural difficulties of its location. The high mountain descends in a ridge that rises in the middle like a hump and then descends again . . . so that it resembles a camel, from which it is named [*Gamla* = camel in Aramaic].

Although Josephus mentions the crowded city and its citadel-like defenses, he does not mention a synagogue. Indeed, with the notable exception of Migdal, aside from the benches lining the wall there is nothing that identifies this or any of these other first-century buildings as synagogues: no inscriptions, no art on the walls, no mosaics on the floors, none of the usual accoutrements of later synagogue buildings. So the question must be asked: do benches make a synagogue?

My Israeli colleague, archeologist-historian Lee Levine, in his book

Ancient Synagogues Revealed, lists the “most frequently mentioned activities” associated with synagogues: prayer, study, meals, a repository for communal funds, court sessions, a guest house and residence for synagogue officials. Levine is clear that “benches were always a fixture in these buildings,” even though none of the undertakings just listed require Jews to be seated. Prayer and study were as often as not done in standing postures; and the other functions that synagogues served likewise did not demand fixed benches.

Most Greco-Roman public and private buildings share the details we see in these early “synagogue” buildings: columns dividing the main hall, as well as benches. Dining rooms (*triclinia*), city council chambers (*bouleteria*), gathering places for all citizenry (*ecclesiasteria*), privy council rooms (*curia*), and the like are examples of essentially secular models from the Roman world that display these architectural features. Churches and pagan temple buildings also share these elements. It may be the case that Herodium, Masada, and Gamla were simply public assembly buildings.

Archeologists tend to describe Roman public buildings by the plans of the buildings or their shapes. Roman-era archeologists distinguish the colonnade (*stoa*), theater, and basilica—an oblong with its visual focus directed toward the front short wall, which may be capped by an apse or semicircular recess, and perhaps even a dome. The basilica has two rows of columns running the length of the building that serve to hold up the roof or second floor, as well as to divide the space into three aisles. Below is a photo of the Basilica of St. Ambrose in Milan. Although it has been repaired and rebuilt over the centuries, the plan and many sections date back to the original fourth- and fifth-century construction. Note the rows of arched columns that divide the church space into a center aisle and side aisles. The front of the church has a rounded apse containing the altar.



BASILICA OF ST. AMBROSE, MILAN

An alternative building plan, the broad-house, is also an oblong, but its focus is at the middle of the long wall. Synagogues and churches seem to be built with one footprint or the other: basilica or broad-house. Further, they share the fact that many of them began as private homes, which were likely donated to the religious community and then architecturally adapted for communal use over time. Excavators have discovered homes upon which were built synagogues that were later expanded or otherwise remodeled—leaving three or more layers of remains for zealous diggers to uncover.

One of the reasons I have made use of archeological terminology is to underscore the extent to which Greco-Roman structural design informs Jewish public buildings in the period. It is not all that surprising that buildings tend to be erected in the styles of the surrounding culture. They partake of the fashion current in a particular locale. If one pauses for a moment to think of American or European synagogues from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the point is well illuminated. Some look like public buildings, while others

look like neighboring churches. Each fits the time and era when it was built.

Before we leap ahead to examine the many different types of Jewish buildings from the later “Talmudic era” (second through seventh centuries CE), we should take a step back to situate Jewish sacred architecture within the broader context of Roman building practices. Synagogues are, to be sure, quintessentially Jewish buildings—but so are the homes and shops and assembly buildings of the Jewish community in Roman Palestine, aren’t they? What makes a building Jewish, *per se*? Is it sufficient that it was in a Jewish town? Or inhabited by Jews? Need it have had a *mezuzah* (see Deut. 6:9) on its doorpost? Or must that building have had a rabbi in charge? This last question seems absurd on its face, since the vast majority of Jews were not, in fact, rabbis. Indeed, it may well be the case that the vast majority of *synagogues* in Late Antiquity were not related to the rabbis either, at least not to those rabbis we know from the classical rabbinic literature. With that in mind, we will take a fairly broad view of the architectural and artistic remains of Palestine and the Diaspora, counting as Jewish pretty much any remnant that bears some relationship to Jews or Judaism.

Lest we think that Jewish buildings shared common features with other Roman construction plans merely due to the limitations of engineering in that period, it is worth remembering that Roman architecture was incredibly sophisticated. Think, for example, of Roman aqueducts. These were driven by gravity, which means that for the water to run from its source to the baths or spouts of a town, great attention had to be paid to the ups and downs of local topography. Considering the lay of the land was a hallmark of all Roman construction.



AQUEDUCT, CAESAREA MARITIMA

Roman architecture also featured refined design. The Pantheon was built in Rome under Emperor Augustus and then rebuilt in the second century during the reign of Hadrian. It remains the largest unreinforced concrete dome in the world. Clearly, Roman architects could build pretty much any way they wished.



PANTHEON, ROME

As I turn back to Jewish buildings, we will see that most ancient

synagogues that have been discovered tend to be basilicas, which means they had columns running down the sides to hold up the roofs or upper stories. This effectively divided the main hall into a central section (nave) and two side aisles. That central hall was approached by means of doors that often opened out into an atrium or other kind of forecourt. Presumably this is where people gathered to enter and maybe to gossip about those within. The ninth-century Midrash on Proverbs captures this double doorway:

“Waiting at the posts of my doors” (Proverbs 8:34). This refers to the gates of prayer. One is obligated to rise early and go to the synagogue every day. There he will enter through the two doorways and then stand in prayer.

This doubled entrance can be seen in synagogues all across the Roman world: in Sardis, Priene, Ostia, Dura, Delos, Aegina, Naro, and Stobi as well as among the synagogues of Roman Palestine. In a church, this area outside the main sanctuary would be called the narthex; but some of these synagogues had both a forecourt as well as a narthex-like section within the synagogue.

Some of the synagogues also had a table in the front, just where one would expect an altar in a church or the Torah-reading platform in a modern synagogue. Here is the table in the immense Sardis synagogue. Note that the upright leg has a Roman eagle and that just beyond the table is one of a pair of lions. Since most contemporary synagogues have Torah reading tables, and public reading of Scripture in synagogues is attested from the first century onward, it is tempting to assume we are looking at such a reader’s table. But we don’t really know what took place at this table, or whether this building had a public civic function before it was given over to the Jewish community. Maybe it came furnished, as it were.



SARDIS SYNAGOGUE STONE TABLE

Depending on the layout of the synagogue, congregants might use any of a number of inner doors to enter on the side of the main auditorium, which held what is called either the Torah-shrine or the seat of Moses, or in some cases they might enter on the side opposite these features.

The Sardis synagogue has three entry doors, with the so-called Torah shrine between the center door and the one to the right. We can see that there are steps leading up to it and that it is carved in stone but made nevertheless to look like a set of doors—symbolic either of the ark where the Torah is stored, or, perhaps, of the doors to the long-gone Jerusalem Temple. Doors like these were a common feature of synagogue art, and we cannot be sure what they were meant to symbolize. They also happen to be found in pagan and Christian Roman settings.

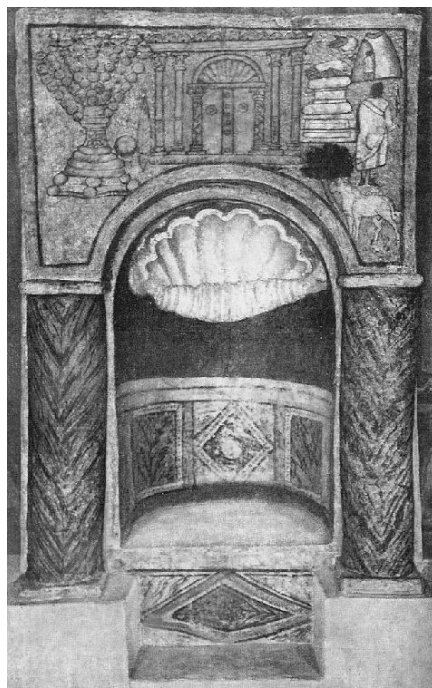
At some synagogues there was a “seat of Moses” in place of the “Torah shrine.” The synagogue at Dura Europos offers an example from the mid-third century. Atop the seating area at the Dura synagogue is a depiction of a large seashell. Above the shell shape

there is both a menorah and a painting of a set of doors. To the right of those doors, just above the right pillar of the “shrine,” is a depiction of the Binding of Isaac from Genesis 22.



SARDIS SYNAGOGUE ENTRYWAYS

Two other features are commonly found among sites identified as synagogues, as well. The first is a side room that may have been used as either a place for the synagogue officials to live or guest quarters. It was fairly common in the Roman world for observant Jews to spend Shabbat—when they would not otherwise travel or do business—within the Jewish communities where they found themselves on their journeys. The Babylonian Talmud reports that three famous rabbis, Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Judah, and Rabbi Yosé, once were traveling outside of the Land of Israel, and when they arrived at a certain town on the eve of the Sabbath, they sought hospitality there.



DURA-EUROPOS SYNAGOGUE, TORAH SHRINE OR SEAT OF MOSES

Of course, these extra rooms attached to the synagogue could equally well have been used for storage or even served as a *geniza*—a book depository for used or worn-out sacred texts. We have evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Bar Kokhba letters, and the Cave of Letters that the storage of documents, old and current, was common among Jewish communities in the Roman world.

The second feature occasionally associated with synagogue sites was a Mikvah, or a ritual immersion pool. These small pools, which were filled with rainwater or other natural water flows, were a primary means of making ritually fit the objects and persons who had contracted unfitness—most commonly through menstruation or semen. When a Jewish community built their synagogue, it was natural for them to build these ritual baths nearby. Yet even here they mimic in some way Roman custom; as in the Hellenistic world, it was *de rigueur* to build public baths among the very first of the buildings erected in a town. Although ritual purity and bodily cleanliness are not the same thing, immersion was nevertheless cleansing. Neither

hospitality nor cleanliness, however, was an exclusively Jewish custom within the Greco-Roman milieu.

Finally, the geographic orientation of a synagogue is notable. Ideally, at least according to rabbinic rulings, worshippers in the synagogue should be facing Jerusalem. As it is expressed in the Tosefta, a third-century companion to the Mishnah:

Those who stand in prayer in the Diaspora should direct their hearts toward the Land of Israel, as it is said, “pray in the direction of their land” (2 Chron. 6:38).

Those who stand in prayer in the Land of Israel should direct their hearts toward Jerusalem and pray, as it is said, “they pray to You in the direction of the city which you have chosen” (2 Chron. 6:34).

Those who stand in prayer in the city of Jerusalem should direct their hearts toward the Temple, as it is said, “to pray towards this house” (2 Chron. 6:32).

Those who stand in prayer in the Temple should direct their hearts toward the Holy of Holies and pray, as it is said, “they pray towards this place” (1 Kings 8:30).

Thus those in the north face the south; those in the south face the north; those in the east face the west; and those in the west face the east. Thus all Israel prays to one place.

It might seem from this rabbinic text that the orientation of a building would be a great help to archeologists who are trying to identify whether certain architectural remains are in fact synagogues. Unfortunately, builders paid much more attention to details of the topography, such as which way the land tilted, what other buildings abutted the space, or whether there was a water source nearby, than they did to rabbinic law—assuming that they knew it or cared about it in the first place.

In truth, the most reliable means of identifying a synagogue from antiquity is the presence of a donor inscription. Of course, we cannot help but appreciate that synagogues of Late Antiquity are identified by

donor plaques, much as modern-day synagogues are. A Midrash from the fifth-century Galilee (Lev. Rabbah 5:4) reminds us that nothing ever changes, at least when it comes to fund-raising:

The story is told that Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, and Rabbi Aqiba traveled to the suburbs of Antioch to collect charity funds. There was a man there called “Father of the Jews” who gave charity generously, but he had lost his fortune. When he saw the rabbis, he went home looking ill . . . the rabbis said to him, “Even though there are others who gave more than you, we still put your name at the head of the donors’ book [*tomos*].”

I know that you are shocked, shocked that donors got special treatment. There was a donors’ list, referred to in Greek/Latin as the “tome.” And just like they do at the opera or ballet today, the largest donors were listed first. In an earlier chapter we saw a Greek donor inscription from the synagogue in Hammat Tiberias. That same synagogue, dating from the third to fourth century, also has an Aramaic inscription that reads, “Peace be to all who gave charity in this Sacred Place and who will give charity in the future. May he be blessed, amen, amen, selah. And to me, amen.” I just love that the guy who laid down the mosaic included himself for a blessing while he was at it.

Assuming for now that we actually can identify a synagogue in the postdestruction period by its inscriptions, art, and architecture, we should note that from the third through sixth centuries CE there was a veritable building boom. I want to discuss eight synagogues to give you a feel for their architecture, their layout, and some of their salient symbols. The number eight has no special valence but represents five Diaspora synagogues from all corners of the Roman Empire, plus three more synagogues from urban centers in the Land of Israel. Right now we will be taking a bird’s-eye view. In our next chapter we will zoom in on the interior features of each and, in particular, its art.

The synagogue of Dura Europos, located on the easternmost border of the Roman Empire, is famous for its shift away from the

nonfigurative art in earlier synagogues to a full flowering of biblical scenes emblazoned on wall-paintings from the top to the bottom of the sanctuary. We have yet to discover pictorial art in synagogues from before the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, with the recently discovered synagogue at Migdal in the Galilee being the notable exception. Dura's synagogue was covered by sand when the town was destroyed in 256 CE, during the Persian invasion. Here is what archeologist Clark Hopkins wrote when he first discovered the synagogue:

All I can remember is the sudden shock and then the astonishment, the disbelief, as painting after painting came into view . . . in spite of having been encased in dry dust for centuries, the murals retained a vivid brightness that was little short of the miraculous.

The synagogue was built in at least two stages. It originally was a private home. Dura, located on the Euphrates River, in what today is Syria, marked the border between the Roman and Sasanian-Persian empires. The synagogue was in a neighborhood that also housed temples to Roman gods, temples to Eastern gods such as Mithra, and a church. The styles of all these buildings are fairly similar. The synagogue was right up against the city's western wall. When that wall was reinforced by heaping an earthen bulwark against the invading Persians, the amazing paintings were inadvertently preserved. Once the Persians conquered the town, in 256 CE, Dura sat desolate until it was excavated in the 1920s. We will return to look more closely at Dura's art soon, but for now it is sufficient to note that the worshippers in the synagogue faced southwest—that is, they faced Jerusalem. While that may be indicative of some kind of piety, it may also simply be a function of the successive layers of building erected as the congregation grew.

I began this chapter by recounting how my wife likes to wander Manhattan observing the architecture. She also travels with me to archeological sites dotted across the former Roman Empire. We have visited locations from England to Israel. Often a dig consist of little more than a low grouping of stones that archeologists have

interpreted as a given building. Sometimes there is little more on an otherwise empty plain than what appears to be a pile of rubble among the weeds. But then, with a little help from a guidebook, the outline of a former building becomes discernible. With a bit of imagination, my wife and I reconstruct the buildings in our mind's eye. My wife tolerates my appetite for visiting otherwise desolate sites because Sandy is a true believer in viewing what she aptly calls "history where it happened."

One such site is at ancient Sardis, now in modern central Turkey. The Sardis synagogue had been a public building before it was turned over to the Jewish community. It fits neatly with its surroundings, and its style—witness the eagle on the table at the front of the synagogue—is decidedly Greco-Roman. The final stage of the synagogue displays the remains of two rows of columns running parallel, creating a basilica with an atrium forecourt. At the western end of the synagogue, behind the large table, was an apse with rounded benches. Perhaps the synagogue elders sat there. The remainder of the congregation faced west-northwest—away from Jerusalem. The Sardis synagogue sits snugly in the ancient town center—there is no modern town at the site—right next to the excavated gymnasium and market.

Sandy and I have also taken the local tram to Rome's ancient port town of Ostia. The synagogue there was founded in the first or second century, and its final construction layer dates to the fourth century. During that time Ostia was still a bustling port. Since then, the waters have receded, leaving the beach of Ostia an entire tram stop farther down the line. The synagogue, in fact, was discovered when highway workers were widening the road to the beach to make it more accessible.

When we waded through the weeds, we found the scant remnant of the Ostia synagogue, with its three doorways, Torah-shrine, and forecourt. This entry court is bordered by a mini-*tetrapylon*—a monumental four-arched gate. While the architectural elegance of the structure seems out of place among the weeds today, it betokens the importance of the Ostia synagogue back when the harbor still reached the town. The inside of the synagogue covers a large area that, at least presently, is lacking interior columns. Yet it does have a curved, apse-like wall on the side opposite the entrance. If the officers of the

synagogue sat on benches around the apse, they would have faced the Holy City (Jerusalem, not Rome). It is easy to imagine the synagogue's elders, shipbuilders, traders, and sailors praying heartily for a safe voyage.

The synagogue at Stobi, in Macedonia, also went through more than one phase of construction. We can gain insights into the gradual stages of a synagogue building program from this particular site. A certain Claudius Tiberius Polycharmos, described as "father of the synagogue at Stobi," repaired and expanded the building. He is mentioned in a lengthy Greek donor inscription. His name is classic Greek, and his imperial-sounding names—Claudius and Tiberius—may reflect his lineage and status. It could be that he had very impressive (and originally non-Jewish) relatives. Or, more likely, someone in his family had been taken captive in a war, become a slave to the imperial household, and eventually earned his freedom. It was the custom for freedmen to take their former owners' names, especially names as impressive as Claudius and Tiberius.

Polycharmos's private home was right next door to the synagogue he dedicated. It had those features one might expect from a wealthy donor: beautiful mosaic floors, a colonnaded court, a fancy dining room (*triclinium*) with a fountain, and another large room with a reflecting pool. I would guess that the synagogue may originally have been part of Polycharmos's house, which he subsequently donated to the community. The current archeological remains of the synagogue include a dining area, an entryway atrium, and a sacred space (labeled in Greek: *hagios topos*) arrayed as a basilica with an apse. The mosaics of the nave are still visible. The identification of the site as a synagogue is further assured by an incised menorah on a plastered wall in one of the rooms off the main hall. A church was later built atop the two layers of the synagogue, and all three building layers were subsequently excavated.

In the ancient North African town of Naro, in modern Hammam Lif, just south of Tunis, the three-door entrance to the synagogue interrupts the long wall opposite the so-called Torah shrine. This broad-house synagogue structure has a beautiful mosaic "carpet," including a Latin inscription identifying it as "*sancta synagoga*." The art of the central mosaic includes renderings of animals, waterfowl,

fruit baskets, a palm tree, and sea creatures. It is flanked by mosaics of menorahs and rather minimalist, abstract mosaics of a palm frond and citron. The latter would be unidentifiable were we not trained to expect them as symbols in synagogue art. The building is double columned and dates to the sixth or seventh century. Hammam Lif is a nice example of ancient North African synagogue construction, not far from where the remnants of the Tunis Jewish congregation still gather for weekly prayer. When my wife and I visited there, we knew we had found the right place by noting the presence of armed guards on the street outside. Such is the fragility of synagogue life, ancient and modern.

We now look toward the Holy Land and briefly describe the layouts of synagogues discovered in three ancient urban Jewish centers: Caesarea Maritima on the Mediterranean shore, Tiberias at the Sea of Galilee, and Sepphoris/Diocaesarea in central Galilee. As the names of these cities indicate, they were built as Roman towns and had a pagan and Christian, as well as Jewish, population. These Jewish communities were embedded in thoroughly Roman contexts. All three of these sites remain available for tourists to visit, as my wife and I have. Go see these ancient synagogue remains with your very own eyes.

Caesarea Maritima served as the imperial port with a major harbor complex. The city was built by Herod in the first century BCE and was named for his patron, Emperor Augustus Caesar. Early in the first century CE, it became the Roman administrative capital, and its fortunes rose and fell with the successive rebellions and quiet of the Jewish population. The synagogue at Caesarea may have been built as a broad-house, with a door to the east. But the sanctuary of the later stratum of the building, dating to the third to fifth centuries, is a basilica with an apse, columns, and a north-south orientation. Congregants did not actually face Jerusalem as a point of worship. The inscriptions are mostly Greek and mention donors who have Greek names. This may be the synagogue where they recited the *Shema* in Greek during their prayers. Some short Hebrew and Aramaic inscriptions were found near the synagogue site. Not surprisingly, excavators also found menorahs incised or carved in relief on some of the remaining capitals.

On the shores of the Sea of Galilee lie the city of Tiberias and its suburb Hammat Tiberias. The synagogue is south of the town, near the hot springs that give the suburb its name (*Hammat* means “hot springs” in Hebrew/Aramaic). In the third and fourth centuries, Tiberias and Hammat more or less merged into one larger metropolis. The Patriarch of the Jews and the rabbinical academy held court there. The first draft of the Palestinian Talmud may have been compiled in rabbinic circles of fourth- to fifth-century Tiberias and Caesarea. This tells us that the rabbis were quite comfortable in what were thoroughly cosmopolitan Roman cities, each replete with pagan populations and imagery.

The synagogue of Tiberias’s suburb Hammat has three sets of columns instead of the usual two, and so the main sanctuary is divided into four sections. Congregants faced southward, in the general if not precise direction of Jerusalem, perhaps in accordance with the dictates of the rabbinic text quoted earlier about which way to face when praying. The Greek donor inscriptions were also quoted previously, seen along with a picture of the donor plaque. That inscription is framed on either side by lions and is part of the central section of the synagogue’s beautiful mosaic carpet. At the opposite end, the mosaic depicts the doors of the ark or of the Temple with menorahs on either side, and the predictable palm, citron, and shofar. The surprise is in the central panel. Here is a zodiac, complete with Greek mythical figures—including an uncircumcised boy representing the month of Tishrei (Libra). Smack in the middle of the zodiac circle is the divine figure of Zeus-Helios, riding his four-horsed quadriga. Depictions of Helios can also be found in synagogue remains at Na’aran (in the South), at Bet Alpha (also in the Galilee), and at Sephphoris. We’ll discuss these unexpected mosaics in our next chapter, I promise.

Right now, we have one more synagogue to consider. The excavations at Sephphoris uncovered significant sections of the Roman-era city. The town sits midway between Caesarea Maritima on the west and Tiberias on the east. Although Jewish sources indicate that it had a majority-Jewish population, the inhabitants did not join the first-century revolt against Rome. Instead, they opened the gates of the city to General Vespasian. Yikes! Its Jewish character, however,

later was assured when Rebbi Judah the Patriarch moved to Sepphoris in the early third century. It is generally thought that Rebbi completed his editing of the Mishnah there. The Palestinian Talmud says that when Rebbi Judah the Patriarch died, the Jews of the eighteen synagogues of Sepphoris turned out to mourn for him.

The city is built on a Roman plan—with a *cardo*, or north-to-south main street, bisecting the city. Many mosaics have been recovered in the excavations, including the one of Aphrodite and Eros discussed earlier. The art and architecture of Sepphoris are, in the words of its archeologists Ze'ev Weiss and Ehud Netzer, “not very different from the pagan cities of the region.” The synagogue they excavated is in the northern part of town, “built on an east-west axis . . . to fit in with the topography and the alignment of the adjacent streets.” Congregants entered through a single door into an antechamber, turned left, and then passed through one of two doors into the main sanctuary.

The art of the Sepphoris synagogue is fascinating, with seven rows of panels making up the central mosaic carpet. Among them there are Greek inscriptions, a depiction of the Binding of Isaac, and the zodiac we just mentioned—with a faceless Zeus-Helios depicted as the orb of the sun in the center. And then there is a menagerie of beasts; the usual menorahs, palm, and citron; and symbolic doors. Captions on these mosaics are in Greek, as are a number of the donor inscriptions. Certain of the biblical scenes are captioned in Hebrew, while some donor acknowledgements are in Aramaic. We are left with an impression of an educated congregation—at least those who liked to look at the mosaic floor.

As these eight synagogues from the Diaspora and the Holy Land demonstrate, the architecture of Jewish buildings was Roman. The cities they were built in were Roman, be they in the Diaspora or in Palestine. Town plans, inscriptions, and public buildings all provided the Greco-Roman milieu in which the Jewish community flourished. City plans were a manifestation of Hellenistic culture. Earlier, we read about poor Rabbi Eliezer's arrest. When asked why he was arrested, he reported, “Once I was walking on the main street (*istrata*) of Sepphoris . . .” I want to focus on that main street, the *istrata*.

Roman cities were planned on a grid, and the major arteries were built on a north-south axis. The main street that divided the town this

way was called the *cardo*, while the east-west divide was the *decumanus*. The term Rabbi Eliezer used, *istrata*, is the same word as “street.” Some of you may recall the 1954 Fellini movie *La Strada*, which was about a road trip. In any case, Rabbi Eliezer was most likely walking on the *cardo* when he met with his trouble. That very same *cardo* has been excavated by archeologists in Sepphoris. But given the size of such a main street, we might expect a *cardo* to show up in many excavations of ancient towns, and indeed it has.

At the crossroads of the *cardo* and the *decumanus*, there was often a monument marking the intersection. This was called a *tetrapylon*, or four-arched gate (mentioned above in our visit to the Ostia synagogue, which grandiosely had its own mini-*tetrapylon* on the synagogue grounds). Archeologists have uncovered many of the grander *tetrapylons* that mark city crossroads. Below is one from Aphrodisias in Asia Minor. Earlier, we discussed the lengthy inscription from the synagogue at Aphrodisias that recognized the “God fearers.”

Although archeologists have not yet discovered the *tetrapylon* of the Jewish Roman city of Caesarea, it is mentioned in a third-century rabbinic source and again, poignantly, in the ninth-century Midrash on Proverbs (chapter 9), where we read how Rabbi Aqiba’s disciple Yehoshua of Gerasa and the prophet Elijah accompanied the great rabbi’s corpse for burial:

They walked all night long until they reached the *tetrapylon* of Caesarea. When they arrived at the *tetrapylon* of Caesarea they first descended and then ascended some steps, and there they found a bier prepared, a bench (*subsellium*), a table, and candelabrum. As they placed Rabbi Aqiba on the bier, the candelabrum lit and the table set! . . . At that moment they said, “Blessed are you Rabbi Aqiba, who has found a good resting place at the hour of your death.



TETRAPHYLON OF APHRODISIAS

The text does not make any mention of Rabbi Aqiba having been tortured, but instead offers a kind of dreamscape in which his disciple Yehoshua walks with the prophet Elijah to accompany the good rabbi to his final resting place. I can't imagine what the *tetrapylon* of Caesarea is doing in this "dream," but might it symbolize the four-chambered heart of the bereft Rabbi Yehoshua? I am certain that it does not describe the actual burial of the sainted rabbi.

Let's leave Rabbi Aqiba to rest in peace, but as we do so, we should take notice of his burial place. Yehoshua and Elijah made ascents and descents until they found the appropriate chamber for his burial. Earlier we saw a Jerusalem burial monument named for Absalom that was actually from the first century. But the most significant Jewish burial finds from both Rome and the Galilee have been those in catacombs. While many tourists visit the Christian catacombs of Rome, few get to see the Jewish ones, which also date back to the second and third centuries. I described my visit to one group of Roman catacombs in the opening chapter. Another of those

Roman Jewish catacombs, at Vigna Randanini, is conveniently located right across the street from the Christian catacombs, just off the famous Appian Way. Meanwhile, in the Galilee from the same era, we have catacomb complexes at Beth She'arim, associated with the family of Judah the Patriarch. This site is one of the only places where we find inscriptions bearing the names of rabbis mentioned in the Talmud.

Catacombs tended to be below-ground complexes, using either natural caves or excavated ones to hold burial chambers on the floors or in the walls. Bodies were left to decompose in these niches, called *sarcophagi* (singular: *sarcophagus*, lit. "flesh eater"). After a year, the bones usually were gathered and reburied into smaller receptacles called ossuaries. Freestanding stone sarcophagi have been discovered in the catacombs, affording more dignified burial, perhaps, than the placement of bodies into the ubiquitous wall niches. Jews no longer use catacombs or sarcophagi and ossuaries to store bones. Even so, most of the Jewish mourning customs that follow burial remain the same.

In the photo are niches in the Roman Jewish catacomb of Vigna Randanini. Once a corpse was within the niche, it was plastered over or left open until the flesh decayed. It may not be immediately clear from the palm tree photo below how these niches were carved. On close inspection we can see that the fresco had been painted, and then, at a later time, when there was need, the community returned to carve new burial sites on either side of the painting. Below it is another example of how this was done. It makes the destruction of the earlier art even more apparent. Clearly, space for burial trumped the funerary art.



VIGNA RANDANINI CATACOMB FIG. 1



VIGNA RANDANINI CATACOMB FIG. 2

A great deal of information can be gleaned from the inscriptions left by the departed Roman Jews. They describe a broad Who's Who of the ancient Jewish world—one in which Greek and Roman names are very common and the Hebrew language is quite rare. We find very few pagan catacombs in the Roman world. The pagan poor were cremated. Those who could afford sepulchers followed the common practice of placing burial monuments on ground level, at the entrance routes to major Roman cities.



SARCOPHAGUS—CAPITOLINE MUSEUMS, ROME

Indeed, the pagan sarcophagus was a ubiquitous feature of the ancient Roman landscape, as common there as they are in today's museums. Here is a sarcophagus adorned with an image of the deceased couple, now reclining at that great symposium in the sky. Notice the motif of the boar hunt, which perhaps is meant to invoke the heroism of the late departed. Boar hunting is found on a number of ancient pagan sarcophagi. Note as well the adorable *putti* (little winged angels) holding a theater mask at the top left.

In another sarcophagus, from the Naples Archeological Museum, other pagan religious motifs are displayed. The bas relief of the deceased couple depicted is wreathed with garlands held up by *putti*. On the sarcophagus's top, there is a kind of seahorse monster, or Cetus, with a corkscrew tail, being ridden, perhaps, by a nereid, or mermaid. This particular mythic animal will appear in our next chapter when we discuss Jewish art.



“LEDA AND SWAN” SARCOPHAGUS—HERACLION MUSEUM

These types of pagan legends are common in the funerary art of Late Antiquity. Another sarcophagus from the Naples Museum depicts the mythic motif of Leda being impregnated by Zeus, who appeared to her in the form of a swan. Just above is an image of Leda and the swan from the museum in Heraclion, Crete (worth visiting if you visit the Greek islands). We will see another version of this motif, too, on a Jewish sarcophagus. Love that swan.

In our tour of synagogues, we visited the pagan world to demonstrate how thoroughly Hellenistic customs infiltrated Judaism, even its conservative burial customs. It's time for a much closer look

at Jewish art in the Roman world. Let's move the tour indoors.

The Handwriting on the Wall (and the Floor and Ceiling): Roman Jewish Art

When I visit synagogues in North America, Europe, and Israel, I am struck at the sheer ubiquity of artistic images: on the walls, in stained glass windows, in the prayer books and Bible volumes, all alongside beautiful Judaica objets d'art. If there was a time that the Jews refrained from making images, it is long, long over. In addition to displays of art, words also appear in synagogues. Clearly, you would expect words to appear in books, but words also are found on memorial and dedication plaques, on identifying inscriptions explaining the art on the walls and windows, and in listings of the names of synagogue leadership. In North America and Europe, these inscriptions are overwhelmingly recorded in Latin letters. Hebrew appears rarely, most often in biblical quotes or to identify holidays depicted in stained glass.

These combinations of pictorial art, along with the small or large inscriptions describing it, appear fairly regularly in American synagogues. For a very long time, folks who visited my boyhood synagogue in Chicago would return to New York to tell me with a smile that they had seen my Hebrew school and bar mitzvah pictures still hanging on the synagogue wall, neatly captioned with my name. Clearly, this was a high point in the history of Jewish art!

In antiquity Jews lived surrounded by artistic and idolatrous imagery also captioned with inscriptions. In bigger cities Jews were exposed to statues, mosaics, and frescoes in vivid, gaudy color. Our beautiful Aphrodite came from a mosaic floor in the banquet room of

a home in Sepphoris. In Hebrew the name for Sepphoris, *Tzippori*, means “birds.” The city’s Greek and Latin name, Diocaesarea, means that the imperial town (*Caesarea*) was dedicated to Zeus (in Greek inflected forms: *Dia*, *Dios*). It was a cultured city with a theater and a *tetrapylon* at the main intersection. Travel guides refer to the Aphrodite mosaic of Sepphoris as the “Mona Lisa of the Galilee”; still, the town has enough other pagan imagery to assure me that the mosaic is not just another pretty face but, indeed, depicts Aphrodite/Venus.

Among the other Greco-Roman art found in Sepphoris is a tiled floor from a private home called by its excavators “the Dionysus mosaic,” named after the god it depicts. That same floor also features a Pan-like centaur and Hercules. In case there is any doubt about who he is, there is a Greek caption identifying him as Herakles, as the name is spelled in Greek. He is engaged in a drinking contest with Dionysus. The centaur, or Pan character, is on the left panel, with the accompanying Greek caption “Bacchae.” The archeologists of Sepphoris also uncovered small statuettes of Pan and of Prometheus, complete with an eagle pecking at his liver. The significant polytheist population of Sepphoris enjoyed Roman-pagan artistic motifs and lived comfortably alongside the Jewish community. Given the art we have uncovered in the synagogue there, I must conclude that the Jews of Sepphoris also were comfortable living among their pagan neighbors.

The pagan images in the mosaics of Sepphoris are delightful. One mosaic shows a scene at Egypt’s Nilometer, depicting the device which measured the annual rise of the famous river. Another scene shows the image of a one-breasted Amazon. Yet another Sepphoris mosaic displays the myth of Orpheus, a figure from Greek and Roman mythology who played his music to soothe the animals. Just to Orpheus’s right is an array of the birds of that birdy town. To his left, a boar, a hare, and a snake in a tree are all calmed by Orpheus’s music.

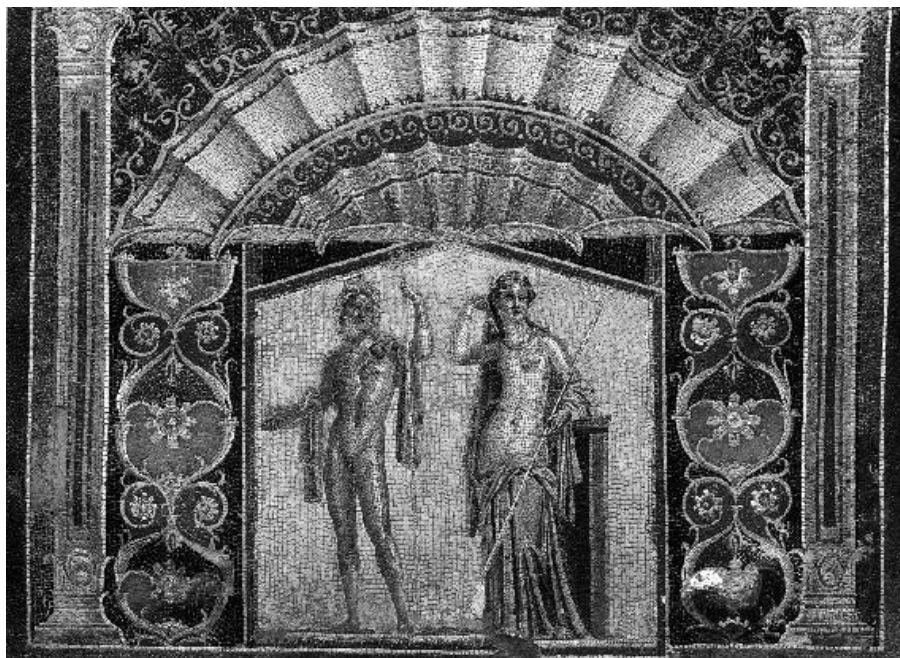
Of course, Jewish tradition tells of another great musician and harp player, King David. So we shouldn’t be entirely surprised to see him on the mosaic floor of the early sixth-century CE synagogue on the coast at Gaza, looking remarkably like Orpheus. Just in case you

might think it actually is Orpheus, the mosaic has a caption to the right of the Jewish king's head identifying him in Hebrew as "David." But he is clearly modeled on Orpheus—his harp is charming a snake, a lioness, and even a giraffe (or maybe a long-necked gazelle).

This brief detour to see King David in Gaza has brought us back from pagan gods and heroes once more to Jewish characters in synagogues. Let's return to Sepphoris now to take a closer look at the art in the synagogue excavated there. The synagogue dates from the fourth century, and its art is typical: menorahs, palm, and citron (the biblically commanded *lulav* and *etrog*, used for the holiday of Sukkot), lions, a shofar, and other biblical horns.

As we walk to the front of the main sanctuary, bordered on either side by the Jewish symbols just mentioned, there is a mosaic panel of the Temple—or maybe it's a Torah ark? In any case, the doors of that building are topped with a shell shape and bracketed by pillars. This ubiquitous depiction of doors is found in many Roman-era synagogues. But it also is found on a sarcophagus in the Naples Museum, there identified as a Christian resting place. And similar sets of doors can be found outside of religious contexts, at least Jewish or Christian ones.

We already have seen "the doorway" in funerary and synagogue contexts, but it is also found on a wall in Herculaneum, the pagan town that was covered along with Pompeii by the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 CE. The doorway is flanked by columns on both sides, with the oft-seen shell above the portal. Within the doorway is neither a Torah nor a Temple priest, but two figures: male and female. Most art historians identify them as Poseidon and his wife, Amphitrite. The shell is appropriate for the King of the Sea.



HERCULANEUM

But what can this tell me about the depiction of the shell and the doorway in synagogue art? That type of doorway may be a Torah ark or shrine, since the one depicted in Rome's Jewish catacomb at Villa Torlonia shows scrolls inside the open doors. It may symbolize God's house, as it seems to be a portal for the gods in the picture above. But the doorway also may be symbolic of the monumental gates of the Jerusalem Temple. In Jewish Roman art it may even represent the synagogue itself. There are too many options to decide with any assurance what the door is supposed to represent. I would like to think that the one thing the doorway should not represent in synagogue art, however, is a portal for pagan gods.

The god Poseidon and his wife are also depicted on a mosaic floor from a private home from Cirta, Libya, dating to the early fourth century CE. There, they are flanked by *putti*, or little angelic figures, along with a pod of dolphins. The divine couple ride their four-horsed chariot, the quadriga, in the heart of the sea—a reasonable place for the Roman god of the waves. But given that Sisera, the enemy of the Israelites, met his end when his chariot became mired in the mud

(Judges ch.4–5), and that Pharaoh and his troops drowned in the Reed Sea (Ex. 14), you have to wonder whether driving a quadriga in the water is such a good idea, god or not.

The quadriga and my mention of the Bible brings me right back to the synagogue at Sepphoris and a confusing, complex image there. The central panel of the synagogue floor's mosaic "carpet" depicts the zodiac, with Zeus-Helios riding his quadriga across the sky as the central focus. The prevalence of the zodiac in synagogue art may indicate an area of divergence between the rabbis of Talmudic circles and the Jews in the synagogue communities of Roman Palestine. The rabbis expressed their stern disapproval of the image, while the Jews in the synagogue seemed to enjoy the motif.

In fact, the zodiac occupies a significant place in the broader Jewish worldview. Each Jewish month is measured by the phases of the moon, visible over its monthly cycle. Given that this is a phenomenon observable in nature, it is not surprising that the months of the Jewish calendar correspond with other cultures' lunar calendars. Indeed, the rabbis' calendar borrows the names of its months from Babylonia; and these months are congruent with the signs of the celestial zodiac. However, the rabbis do not believe that astrology rules Jewish fate—the Talmud explicitly rejects this notion when it more than once pronounces: "The astrological signs [Hebrew: *mazal*] are not for the Jews."

Yet in Palestinian synagogue zodiac mosaics, the months are depicted by astrological signs. The roundel of synagogue zodiac wheels, even when they are captioned in Hebrew, depicts those signs. The circle of the lunar months is enclosed within a square. Each of the four corners embracing the zodiac circle has a mosaic representing one of the four seasons, while the months in the circle are most often, but not always, situated in the correct seasonal quadrant. A representative of the night sky in which the constellations of the zodiac are visible seems like an obvious choice for the center of the circle. Or a depiction of the moon and stars would be interesting. Because the book of Genesis tells us that "there was evening, there was morning," we might also expect to see a picture of the sun in its course across the sky.

Throughout the ancient world, the sun was the preeminent symbol

of daily constancy. The diurnal round of the sun with its warmth and healing power was seen as a benefaction from the gods or from God. In polytheistic pagan cultures, the sun was often seen as a god, Sol Invictus, the invincible sun, also known as Zeus-Helios. Yet anyone who has read the Ten Commandments knows only too well that this is a disturbing, even forbidden, notion. Exodus 20: 3–5 commands:

You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make any statue nor any depiction of what is in the heaven above, nor on the earth below, nor in the waters below on the earth. You shall not bow down to them nor worship them, for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God . . .

When Rabbi Gamaliel made his comment about Aphrodite in the bathhouse, which I recounted to you earlier, he offered Jewish legal parameters for representation of living forms in subsequent Jewish art. We do not represent gods to be worshipped but can represent figures, even human, for aesthetic reasons. Beauty is not forbidden; it is rather encouraged, especially as an offering to God. This is how Gamaliel was able to bathe before that statue of Aphrodite. Even so, the center of the zodiac at the Sepphoris synagogue remains challenging, as it depicts the sun god Helios, riding his heavenly quadriga across the daytime sky.

In the mosaic at Sepphoris, even as the horses pulling the chariot are realistically drawn, Helios is depicted only as an orb with rays emanating to light the world. To the right of the sun-like circle, the mosaic artist also depicted the crescent moon and one star. Clearly, the community of the synagogue in Sepphoris was not too worried about the Second Commandment's prohibition against heavenly bodies, even if Helios was depicted only symbolically. This representation might reflect a tradition in the Babylonian Talmud, where Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hannaniah likened the difficulty of looking directly at the sun to the difficulty of beholding God. So perhaps the orb of the sun in the Sepphoris synagogue mosaic is meant only to represent, but not to picture, God.

In truth, this mosaic is hardly unique. The synagogues in Huseifa and Hammat Tiberias also have zodiacs on their floors. At Hammat,

Helios/Sol is not merely an orb, but incarnate. Zeus-Helios is depicted in handsome human form, holding the orb of royalty and a whip, perhaps to urge his quadriga-chariot across the sky. He is surrounded by the zodiac wheel. Each of the months has a name captioned in Hebrew, as does the four-season mosaics in each quadrant of the square that surrounds the zodiac circle. Aquarius is denoted with a Hebrew caption that is spelled backwards—perhaps indicating that the mosaic artist did not know the language and might have been a pagan who found work in the synagogue. It would be convenient to blame the floor on a non-Jewish artisan. Yet someone in that Jewish community approved the design and paid the bill.

Hammat Tiberias and even Sepphoris/Diocaesarea were Roman imperial cities. So it is possible that the Jews there were more assimilated and so were more comfortable with these pagan symbols. Perhaps the urban communities were just that much more cosmopolitan and laissez-faire about their Jewish practice. But in fact there are also zodiacs in the small town synagogues of Na'aran, near Jericho, and at Beit Alpha, in the Galilee. These are not big urban centers, and while the primitive art of Beit Alpha shows a lack of sophistication, it enthusiastically embraces the Zeus-Helios image. In the photo of Beit Alpha below, note the wheel of the zodiac and the four seasons in the corners. Zeus-Helios emanates rays of light and has a moon and stars accompanying him. Was this a case of the small town community having art envy? Or am I making too much of this apparently pagan image adorning a synagogue?

To further complicate our understanding of the images found on these synagogue floors, Helios is invoked in a Jewish prayer, recovered in a quasi-magical liturgical text from the fourth century CE among the manuscripts of the Cairo Geniza, the ancient used-book depository. The prayer is in a manuscript called *Sefer HaRazim*, the Book of Mysteries. We quoted this prayer above, while discussing Gamaliel's bath with Aphrodite. Here is the line of Greek, transliterated into Hebrew, which names Helios:

I revere you HELIOS, who rises in the east, the good sailor
who keeps faith, the heavenly leader who turns the great
celestial wheel, who orders the holiness (of the planets),

who rules over the poles, Lord, radiant ruler, who fixes the stars.

The Helios prayer gives us a peek at Greco-Roman Jewish folk religion in Roman Palestine during this period. Perhaps it also sheds light on the Zeus-Helios images on the synagogue floors. Helios, or Sol Invictus, as he was known in Latin, apparently was a revered god, at least by some. He was a pagan god who might have been identified with the One and Only God in the minds of the Jews who beheld him riding across their community's synagogue floor.



BEIT ALPHA SYNAGOGUE MOSAIC

The Helios phenomenon is even more complicated than the Jewish evidence alone allows. The last pagan emperor, Julian, who reigned from 361 to 363, wrote about Helios,

What I am now about to say I consider to be of the greatest importance for all things “That breathe and move upon the earth” and have a share in existence and a reasoning soul

and intelligence, but above all others it is of importance to myself. For I am a follower of King Helios . . . the King of the whole universe, who is the center of all things that exist. He, therefore, whether it is right to call him the Supra-Intelligible, or the Idea of Being, and by Being I mean the whole intelligible region, or the One. . . .

In Julian's "Hymn to King Helios," we see a pagan praise his god as the One. Julian defines attributes of Helios not unlike those that the rabbis attribute to their one God. To the extent that the Jews who placed the image of Zeus/Helios on the floors of their synagogues knew or agreed with Julian's theology, the image may have been a convenient pictorial stand-in for God. Some synagogue mosaics depicting biblical stories also show the hand of God reaching down from Heaven. So Helios simply might represent the Jews' God in these synagogue mosaics.

We're not quite done with Zeus-Helios, aka Solis Invictus. Julian was not the only emperor fascinated with the god. Roman emperors not only invoked Sol's assistance, but also identified themselves as incarnate manifestations of the god. The dedicatory altar to Sol, depicted below, was originally found in Palmyra, to the northeast of Roman Palestine in modern Syria. The inscription on the front of the altar, in Latin, invokes the god Sol. The Mandaic inscription on the side identifies him as King Bel. Note that Sol/Helios rides the quadriga of winged horses. Behind Sol an angel crowns him with rays of light. The small receptacle atop Sol's head—formed by the angel crowning him with a halo—likely was filled with oil so that literal flames emanated from this bas relief of Sol Invictus.



SOL INVICTUS—CAPITOLINE MUSEUMS, ROME

The image of Sol on the chariot with angelic accompaniment may be seen mirrored in this image of Emperor Titus at his apotheosis, commemorated on the interior of the infamous arch of Titus in Rome. The other side of the arch presents the well-known relief of Roman soldiers carrying in triumph the despoiled menorah and other implements from the conquered Jerusalem Temple.

Much like Sol Invictus, Titus rides the quadriga (although his horses lack wings), and an angelic figure has his back. Titus is not the only emperor so depicted. The Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius is depicted in a bas relief riding his quadriga, again with the angelic *genius* of Rome flying at his back.

This gives me pause. These images in their various Greco-Roman guises were abundantly visible to Jews throughout the Roman Empire. Perhaps we should not read too much into the image of Zeus-Helios in the zodiacs on the synagogue floors after all, despite the *Sefer HaRazim* prayer and Emperor Julian's hymn. Romans saw this imagery everywhere. Sol Invictus might have been a god to some, but sometimes art is just art, and Sol was simply meant to represent the

sun, no more. The tourists who check into the Hotel Solis Invictus in modern Rome most likely do not do so as an act of idol worship.



ARCH OF TITUS—ROME



MARCUS AURELIUS—CAPITOLINE MUSEUMS, ROME

The images of Zeus-Helios and the zodiac often are found combined with biblical scenes as part of larger synagogue mosaic “carpets.” The most frequent biblical image is of the seven-branched candelabrum, the Menorah of the Jerusalem Temple. As the Torah

makes abundantly clear, God likes a nicely lit menorah. In Numbers 8:1–4, God commands Moses to tell his brother, Aaron, the High Priest, “When you mount the Menorah, let seven lamps give light at the front of the Menorah.” And the passage concludes, “According to the pattern God has shown Moses, so was the Menorah made.” Much more detail of the manufacture of the menorah of the desert tabernacle may be found in Exodus 25: 31–40 and again summarized in Exodus 37:17–24, where the Bible describes how the architect of the tabernacle, Bezalel, did his God-inspired work. Finally, in a set of passages dedicated to the animal offerings that were to be brought for each holiday, Leviticus 24:1–4 reports that God told Moses, “Command the Israelite folk to bring clear beaten olive oil to light and raise up an eternal flame . . . upon the pure [gold] Menorah to burn eternally before the Lord.”

There are bas reliefs of a menorah on the arch of Titus in Rome, as well as at the synagogue remains in Ostia, and etched into the memorial plaque of a Roman Jewish catacomb. Note that to one side of the menorah pictured is a palm and citron (*lulav* and *etrog*), while on the other side, there is what looks like a ram’s horn. Another memorial in the catacomb mentions the teacher Deutero, who is recalled as sweet (*dulcis*). He, too, is remembered with a menorah and what looks to be a citron.

The photo labeled Catacomb Fig. 3 shows one last menorah from the same catacomb. This one has been frescoed onto the wall.



CATACOMB FIG. 1—VIGNA RANDANINI, ROME



CATACOMB FIG. 2—VIGNA RANDANINI, ROME

There are dozens of images of the menorah from Jewish communities in all corners of the Roman Empire. Archeologists uncovered a bronze cast of a menorah from the synagogue at Ein Gedi, to the west of the Dead Sea, while menorah images are ubiquitous on humble clay oil lamps from the period, which—if you think about it—is kind of ironic.

Jewish art had a somewhat standard iconography accompanying the pagan imagery that was also in use in Roman-era and Byzantine synagogues. Some of this imagery comes from narratives in the Torah. At the synagogue in Sepphoris, among other synagogues, actual verses of Scripture in Hebrew or Greek served as captions for mosaics. I suppose this is not unlike stained glass windows found in synagogues (and churches) across North America. One of the biblical images we often see in modern houses of worship, as well as in the synagogues of Roman Palestine, is the story of the Binding of Isaac, recounted in Genesis 22. This powerful narrative was not only chanted in the synagogue when a congregation read the book of Genesis, but it was also the Torah reading for the Jewish New Year, Rosh HaShannah. The fragment that has survived in the Sepphoris synagogue depicts the two servants who accompanied Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 22:5).



CATACOMB FIG. 3—VIGNA RANDANINI, ROME

The illustration of the entire story of the Binding of Isaac at the small town synagogue of Beit Alpha, on the other hand, is primitive and shocking to behold. On the left are the two servant lads; to the right is the fire altar, Abraham, and a small Isaac, both of whom are identified by captions in Hebrew. In the center of the image, also with Hebrew captions, we see the ram caught in the thicket and the biblical words, “Do not put forth [your hand against the boy]” (Gen. 22:12), uttered by the angel of God in order to bring the approaching sacrifice of Isaac to a halt. The voice emanates from a dark-colored mosaic disc, with rays on either side and with a five-fingered hand extending toward Abraham. Is this the hand of God’s angel or possibly even the hand of God? Either way, it is a daring depiction of the unseeable, ineffable manifestation of the Jewish God. Or perhaps, like the orb of Helios in Sepphoris, that disc is an artistic stand-in for God, rather than a physical representation of God’s hand.



OIL LAMP FRAGMENT WITH MENORAH—MILAN ARCHEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

A conundrum is found in an archeological site in Mopsuestia, in Asia Minor. There, in a fourth- to fifth-century CE basilica building oriented east to west, is a stunning mosaic of Noah's ark, so labeled in Greek, and a series of mosaics depicting the Samson story found in the book of Judges 14–16, with fragments of quotes from the Greek translation of the biblical text. There is really only one difficulty with this site, which is otherwise a beautiful example of Roman mosaic art applied to biblical motifs: we do not know whether the building is a church or a synagogue. Scholars disagree on its role. As you might guess, Jewish archeologists identify the site as a synagogue, while Christian scholars assume it is a church.



BEIT ALPHA SYNAGOGUE

Another site that all agree is a church—indeed, it is still in use as such—is in Madaba, in modern Jordan. On the floor of the church, roped off so that tourists and parishioners do not step on it, is a mosaic map of the world that dates to the mid-sixth century CE. It is the oldest map of the Holy Land in existence. Like most maps, it has captions that identify countries, but in the case of Madaba, the map identifies biblical sites and local ancient churches. At the center of the map—that is to say, the center of the cartographer’s universe—is Jerusalem, identified in Greek as the “Holy City.” Because the map is oriented with West on top, above Jerusalem sits the Mediterranean Sea, boats and all. Here is the section of the map depicting Jerusalem. You can see its columned *cardo* running left to right (south to north) across the city.



MADABA MAP, JORDAN

Let's turn now from the busy passage of the living along Jerusalem's *cardo* on the Madaba map to the equally busy precincts of the dead. I want to take a look at the art in the Jewish catacombs of Rome and of Beit She'arim in the Galilee. The menorah is ubiquitous as a symbol in these burial settings, much as it is in almost every other Jewish site. But the Jews also employed non-Jewish, even pagan, symbols in these Jewish burial places. Among the pagan symbols found is art depicting the myth of Zeus disguised as a swan raping or seducing Leda—something one would not expect in either pagan or Jewish sarcophagi, but there they are. There is a fragment of a Leda sarcophagus from the Jewish catacomb at Beit She'arim, a burial site actually containing tombs of rabbis known to us from the Talmud! We also have mentioned a pagan Leda sarcophagus, now in the Naples Museum, and seen an image of Leda and the swan from Heraclion. Still, one must ask why Leda and the swan are in a cemetery at all, and especially in a Jewish setting? In reply to this reasonable question, I translate the Yiddish expression "*Geh vays*": go figure.

In addition to the swan image in the Beth She'arim catacomb, a seahorse monster like the one I spoke about that is on the cover of a sarcophagus from the Naples Museum appears in a fresco in the

Roman Jewish catacomb at Vigna Randanini.

When featured on the pagan tomb, it could reasonably be assumed to represent a nereid riding the Cetus seahorse monster of Greco-Roman mythology. But the animal is virtually the same in the Jewish catacomb, only absent the mermaid riding on its back. In fact, the lone Cetus also appears in the Christian catacombs in the same neighborhood of Rome as the Jewish Vigna Randanini catacomb. In the St. Callisto and in the Priscilla Christian catacombs, the Cetus is none other than the big fish swallowing Jonah!



JEWISH CATACOMB FIG. 1 AT VIGNA RANDANINI, ROME

For Christians, both the fish and Jonah are symbols of resurrection; the fish took Jonah down to Sheol (the underworld) but then delivered him to dry land after three days and nights. For Christians this prefigures Jesus's death and resurrection. But the Cetus in the Jewish catacomb, however, depicts neither Jonah nor a nereid. We might take the hint from the Christian catacombs and suggest that in the Jewish catacombs, too, the Cetus is a symbol of resurrection. What complicates this identification is the appearance of a Cetus seahorse monster on the base of the Menorah depicted on the Arch of Titus. Something fishy is going on here, as this might be the last place one would expect to find such an image. Most interpreters of the Menorah on the Arch assume the base was decorated by pagan Romans and is not an actual depiction of the base of the Menorah that

stood in the Jerusalem Temple. I suspect that in virtually all Jewish settings, the seahorse was simply meant to depict just another creature of the deep, much as the fresco artist also depicted birds or palm trees. It's best to avoid the temptation to overinterpret.

There are still more pagan motifs in the Jewish catacomb at Vigna Randanini. On the arched dome of one of the catacomb chambers, we find what the late scholar of ancient Roman Judaism Harry Leon described as the winged goddess of victory, Nike, crowning a youth holding the palm frond of victory.



JEWISH CATACOMB FIG. 2



JEWISH CATACOMB FIG. 3

Angelic winged *putti* regularly appear in Roman funerary and other art. The Vigna Randanini Jewish catacomb shares this apparently pagan motif. Above is another fresco from that catacomb.

It is true that there were angelic figures called cherubs on the Ark of the Covenant that the Israelites carried with them in the desert. But sometimes a cherubic character means no more than the cloying little angels you might find on a Hallmark card. I suspect that the frequency of pagan images in the Roman Jewish catacombs shows us the ease with which that Jewish community assimilated the art of their neighbors. Yet for all of the artistic overlap, Jews did not adopt Roman or Christian burial customs in any wholesale fashion. The Jewish community had its own unique law and traditions for burial and mourning.

We visited the border town of Dura earlier in this book. The wall paintings of the Dura synagogue are the oldest pictorial art in the Jewish world. Dura was a Roman military installation at the far eastern end of the empire, on the bank of the Euphrates River. It served as a bulwark against the Sasanian-Parthians to the east. The

synagogue of Dura originated as a private home that followed a fairly common Jewish practice when it was converted into the synagogue. The building was renovated in 244 CE, at which time the spectacular wall paintings that adorn it most likely were added to the decor. When the Parthian Empire warred against Rome in the mid-third century, Dura took the brunt of the attack. The east side of Dura was protected by the Euphrates itself. The citizens of the town shored up its walls on the west side, where the assault took place. They piled dirt up to buttress the town walls and did the same in the buildings that abutted those walls. The synagogue of Dura-Europos was among those buildings, and through this act of fortification the amazing wall paintings of the Dura synagogue were preserved. The town of Dura was overrun in 256 CE, left desolate by the Parthians, and only uncovered again in the early twentieth century.

Very few walls of art painted in Late Antiquity have been preserved. The problem of preservation is one of basic physics. Frescoes and wall paintings were painted on upright walls. Mosaic “carpets,” on the other hand, were laid upon floors. Walls fall down over time, while the mosaics, already on the ground, are more likely to be preserved for archeologists to uncover. Some of the few sites that have yielded wall paintings or frescoes from the period were similarly covered over and left abandoned for centuries. Pompeii and Herculaneum were both inundated by ash when Vesuvius erupted in 79 CE.

The rabbis refer to the making of both frescoes and mosaics. For example, in commenting on the verse (Gen. 1:31) “God saw all that God had made and behold, it was very good,” a fifth-century Galilean commentary on Genesis by the rabbis observes:

Rabbi Yonatan said, “This is like a king who married off his daughter and made her a marriage-apartment, which he plastered, and then paneled or painted. When he saw it, it pleased him . . .”

Elsewhere, the same Midrash likens God creating the universe to

a human king who builds a palace. He does not build it of

his own knowledge, but rather the knowledge of an artisan. And the artisan does not build it out of his own knowledge, but rather uses parchment scrolls and sketch books to know how to lay down the mosaics.

In 1996, near Ben Gurion Airport, in Israel, in the town of Lod, or what had been ancient Diospolis (city of Zeus), archeologists uncovered an early fourth-century CE mosaic floor measuring approximately twenty-five feet by fifty feet. Recently, another, similar mosaic measuring thirty-six feet by forty-two feet was discovered near the Lod site while the archeologists were digging the foundations of a museum to display the earlier find! The well-preserved floor from the 1996 discovery, replete with tiled pictures of animals, was displayed in 2011 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, as an example of “Roman influence on local mosaic art.”

Even at the far eastern edge of the empire, Rome’s power is palpable. The wall paintings of the synagogue at Dura-Europos reflect Roman influence. The biblical characters in the Dura paintings by and large are shown in Roman dress. The very style of painting is Roman. In the mid-third century, in the exact era when rabbinic traditions traveled from Roman Palestine to the newly formed rabbinic academies in Sasanian-Parthian Babylonia, we find midrashic interpretations of biblical scenes among the panels of paintings on the walls of the synagogue at Dura.

The walls are covered from top to bottom with this art—a stunning display of what art historians call *horror vacui*, the tendency of certain artists to avoid leaving any empty space on their canvases or walls. This has given us all the more art to enjoy and interpret, although it does lead me to wonder if the busy walls of the synagogue at Dura might have induced feelings of claustrophobia among the worshippers. Here, I will focus on the Hellenizing aspects of these paintings rather than their artistic interpretations of Scripture.

During the 1920s and ’30s, archeologist Clark Hopkins excavated the Dura synagogue, the church, and temples to traditional Roman gods, as well as to eastern gods such as Mithra. Images abounded, even those of the Zoroastrian religion of the Parthian/Persian Sasanians, Rome’s enemies to the east. In the synagogue paintings of

Dura-Europos, the majority of the biblical characters, including all of the “Jewish” characters, wear Roman garb. But certain eastern types, such as King Ahashverosh, are depicted in eastern clothing. Ahashverosh was king of the Persians and the Medes, and he is shown wearing a Phrygian cap and eastern clothing. He is sitting on the throne in the picture below. Next to him sits Queen Esther, his Jewish wife, bedecked with a Roman-style tiara of a city skyline—perhaps of Jerusalem. Such crowns were well known in the art of the period, and we have depictions of both women and of Tyche, the tutelary Greek goddess of given city, wearing tiaras that depict their cities.

Queen Esther is not the only woman depicted on the Dura synagogue walls. There is an entire cycle of paintings dedicated to the life of Moses. Prominent among the panels is the scene of Pharaoh’s daughter lifting baby Moses out of the Nile. Appropriately for the Nile, if not a synagogue wall, the princess is naked, but for her bangles. The Esther cycle of paintings and the Pharaoh’s daughter painting are on either side of the Torah shrine, or seat of Moses, which is the focal point of the Dura synagogue.

At Dura even the synagogue ceiling was covered with art. The tiles there included donor inscriptions in Aramaic, portraits—perhaps of the donors—and depictions of animals from Greco-Roman myth, such as the centaur and the now-familiar Cetus. The large portraits that are above the “seat of Moses” to either side, which would have been the central visual focus for congregants, are wearing distinctly Roman garb. Moses at the burning bush (see illustration labeled Moses at Dura) wears a Greco-Roman undergarment, the *chiton*, over which is draped the *himation*, a rectangular cloth adorned with a stripe ending in a notch. The stripes on the garments, called *clavi*, are associated with Roman patrician and military officers’ garb. Note in the Moses at Dura figure below that at God’s command Moses has removed his shoes (Ex. 3:5), which seem to be a shepherd’s soft boots. See as well that God’s hand appears in the painting (mysteriously more visible in the color plate), not unlike the hand of God in the Beit Alpha mosaic of the Binding of Isaac. This painting of Moses in Greco-Roman garb typifies the depictions of the principal Jewish males throughout most of the Dura synagogue panels. Ritual fringes for their four-cornered garments (see Num. 15:38) are absent in the Dura paintings, even

though rabbinic interpretation of the biblical law might lead us to expect the male characters' clothing to be adorned with them. Perhaps the artists reasoned that biblical figures might not yet have known the law of the Torah. Or perhaps the Dura artists knew the story of the rabbinical student who had that odd adventure when his fringes smacked him, by Aphrodite!



AHASHVEROSH AND ESTHER IN DURA SYNAGOGUE



DURA SYNAGOGUE LONG WALL

In any case, to the right of the “seat of Moses” in the Dura sanctuary is a painting of the prophet Samuel anointing David as the new King of Israel (I Sam. 16:11–13). David stands among his brothers, each in Greek *himation* with *clavi* stripes, including the garment of the prophet Samuel. David himself is wearing a gown of royal blue or, better, imperial purple, lacking *clavi*. In Rome, equestrians wore thin stripes. Senators wore broader stripes. But only the emperor could have an entire garment of purple. Roman convention indicates David’s royal status.

Because I kvetched in our previous chapter about archeologists making a fuss about the presence of benches in predestruction synagogues, I am honor-bound to point out that the Dura synagogue indeed did have a row of benches around its perimeter. Maybe benches really do make a synagogue!

At Dura we find inscriptions in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—languages that we now expect among Greco-Roman Jews. There are also inscriptions and graffiti in Middle Persian and Parthian at Dura-Europos. Given the locale of the synagogue, this is not all that surprising. Merchants, traders, caravaneers, and others were part of the Jewish community. But while Greek points to an eastern Roman identity, we see that at the far border, Jews straddled Aramaic, Greek, and Persian/Parthian identity. They lived comfortably among their

neighbors, at home in Sasanian Parthia, or, as they might say, Jewish Babylonia. At the same time, the Jews of Dura-Europos bore their Roman citizenship proudly, ultimately dying for it when the town and its synagogue fell to the Parthian besiegers.



MOSES AT DURA

During the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, European art historians, particularly German-speaking ones, spoke derisively of the Jews as “an artless people.” Their pun depicted Jews as awkward bumpkins and asserted that the cultural output of the Jews did not include pictorial art. As we saw when we read about Rabbi Gamaliel and Aphrodite, there is almost no evidence of pictorial

art from before the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. It is not surprising that when pictorial art finally was embraced, the Jews turned to the surrounding culture for models and guidance. I have shepherded you through the explosion of Jewish art from Dura in the third century CE up to the Islamic conquest—art that belies the old canard of narrow-minded art historians. Hardly an “artless people,” the Jews embraced Roman artistic principles with open arms across the entire breadth of the empire. The genius of Jewish artistic imagination was the genius of Rome.

From Temple Cult to Roman Culture

We've traveled the Roman Empire visiting its Jewish communities. One abiding feature of the Judaism I have been showing you was, and remains, its steadfast loyalty to the Torah as a means of identifying with God's covenantal community. This focus on Torah as a text to be studied by everyone was something new. It marked a turn away from the priestly sacrificial cult of the Jerusalem Temple and their exclusive pretensions to control of the sacred text. Further, the destruction of the Temple brought an end to the animal sacrifices that are so central to the Torah's narrative.

The turn to Torah study instead of sacrifice was one more manifestation of how Hellenism reshaped Judaism in the late Second Temple period. This shift was the rabbis' way to move the power center of Judaism to their own focus on textual interpretation in the aftermath of Jerusalem's destruction. The latest of the books included in the Bible already begin to show traces of this Hellenistic bookish culture. It is not mere chance that the book of Ecclesiastes (12:9–12) closes by musing: "Because Ecclesiastes was a sage . . . he expounded many parables [Hebrew: *meshalim*, Greek: *parabole*] . . . writing words of truth: . . . There is no end to the making of many books."

Mind you, the Bible does not say Ecclesiastes was a professor who was required to publish or perish. Rather, he is described as a sage. In Hebrew that's the same word the rabbis use to describe themselves,

while in Greek the term is *sophos*, as in philo-sopher, or sophist. Writing parables and truth: these are the earmarks of Greco-Roman culture, a culture of many books.

“Many books” comes with the need to teach disciples how to interpret the canon of texts that defines the community. Even the simple idea of books and disciples was a turn away from the earlier emphasis on the dynastic kings and cultic priesthood of biblical Israelite religion. The philosophical schools of the Greeks and even the rhetorical schools of the Romans were based upon discipleship, and it was this model that the rabbis chose. The Greco-Roman educational enterprise of *paideia*, cultural instruction with its focus on Homer and other canonical texts, led directly to the rabbinic enterprise of Scriptural interpretation and then to the dialectical consideration of the rabbis’ Mishnah.

At the moment that the Greco-Roman world turned from its belief in the efficacy of animal sacrifices—even as they continued to be offered—the latest books of the Bible and the rabbis, too, prepared to approach God a different way. No longer was God’s banquet meal the sweet savor of animal sacrifices. After 70 CE, the rabbis imagined the covenantal meal as a very different kind of banquet. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, arguably the founder of rabbinic Judaism, is reported to have taught his disciples:

In my dream, you and I were all reclining-at-banquet on Mt. Sinai. A heavenly voice was given to us, “Come up here, come up here! There are great banquet tables [*triclinia*] that are well spread with fine foods for you. You, your disciples, and your disciples’ students are invited to the top tier!” (Babylonian Talmud Hagiga 14b)

No longer is Mt. Sinai recalled as the place from which Moses brings down instruction for the construction of the altar, which was attended by his brother Aaron’s dynastic priesthood—which offered animal sacrifices to God. Instead, Rabbi Yohanan’s dream, fully realized in rabbinic Judaism, is of a Sinai where masters and their disciples in the study of Torah are invited to the Hellenistic banquet. There, they recline on the most prestigious couches at God’s *triclinium*.

The almost casual Hellenization of Yohanan's reported dream speaks volumes about the shift to Greco-Roman culture—even Mt. Sinai is now conceived of as a Roman banquet room! As the rabbis say in Pirke Avot (ch. 4): "Prepare yourself in the ante-chamber [Hebrew: *prozdor*, Greek: *prothura*], so that you may enter the banquet hall [*triclinium*]."

I have suggested here that rabbinic Judaism is a new religion, divorced and separate from the biblical, Israelite religion of the Temple cult that preceded it. Yet my discussion of the late biblical antecedents of Hellenism, added to the evidence I quoted earlier in this book about the possibility of synagogues' existing before the destruction, should raise a flag of caution. In fact, the rabbinic obsession with Scripture, manifest in the rabbis' interpretations of every detail of biblical law, including the minute facets of the moribund Temple and its procedures, makes it clear that rabbinic Judaism is not a wholly new religion, created *ex nihilo*, out of nothingness. This shift was already under way before the time of the rabbis. On one hand, there would be no wholesale assimilation to Hellenism with a loss of Jewish identity. On the other, ancient Jewish rituals were not abandoned. Rather, there would be a measured appropriation and adaptation of Greco-Roman culture that found its expression in post-70 CE Judaism.

The ways in which I have characterized Judaism, whether as utterly new or as a remix of an old tune, are fraught with ideological significance. What characterizes the new Judaism and separates it from other emerging ideologies? Is rabbinic Judaism just one more new religion, one more flavor of many Judaisms in the Late Antique world, there to take its place alongside Christianity and other Greco-Roman religions? Or is rabbinic Judaism the one and only authentic inheritor of biblical "Judaism," genetically similar by virtue of both the performed commandments (*mitzvot*) and the constant justifying of those *mitzvot* through tying them to their presumed Scriptural origins? Remember that in the period I am considering, *rabbinic* Judaism was not the major face of Judaism it would become for the millennium of its European ascendance, say from 940 to 1940 CE. It was only in that much later period that rabbis had the actual power to enforce their dicta. The first millennium of rabbinic Judaism resembled the Judaism

we have now, in which each individual Jew chooses adherence to the commandments and how that adherence is manifested in daily behavior. To get to now, the rabbis then needed persistence, vision, and Roman Stoic stolidity to survive. The very virtues the rabbis adopted from Roman culture were among the forces that allowed Judaism to survive against oppressive odds.

The methods and biases of this book remain relevant to understanding the meaning of the journey we have taken together. However much I may see Greco-Roman culture as the context and content for rabbinic Judaism, there nevertheless remain strong ties to the biblical religion that birthed it. My bias may be as a Western university-trained scholar, but I am also a rabbi. I have been trying to keep a sense of the contexts of Judaism, particularly rabbinic Judaism, and its development within the Greco-Roman world. Early in this book I recounted a parable about a wily fox and a fish out of water. In 2005, the late author David Foster Wallace gave a commencement speech at Kenyon College. He opened with his own parable:

There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says “Morning, boys. How’s the water?”

And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes “What the hell is water?”

Aphrodite and the Rabbis is an attempt to answer both of the questions posed in Foster Wallace’s parable. As I have suggested, it is an examination of both content and context: both “How’s the water?” and “What the hell is water?” I hope I have convinced you of the extent to which the water the rabbis swam in was itself Greco-Roman culture.

The many varieties of Judaism may not all have been rabbinic, yet they shared customs, iconography, and common Hellenistic culture with the rabbis and with the other Jews in the empire. Whether it was the good relations they had with the neighbors whom they called God- or Heaven-fearers, or the overwhelming presence of the menorah as a Jewish symbol, Judaism was clearly identifiable from place to place.

Pagans and Christians “knew it when they saw it.” They report about certain kinds of Sabbath observance, odd dietary customs, the palm frond and citron, the ram’s horn—all of these were identifiable as elements of Judaism, among the various Jewish communities as well as to non-Jewish observers. Today it might be called “dog-whistle,” this subtle array of symbols and customs that united Jews one to another. They were Romans, to be sure, but also simultaneously members of their own exclusive community. This exclusivism also helped serve as a survival mechanism.

The Jews, and the rabbis in particular, carried a great deal of ambivalence about the Roman culture in which they flourished (“what the hell is water?”). I wrote of how the rabbis equated Rome with the biblical Esau/Edom. This tribe was surely deemed to be “other,” yet anyone who reads the book of Genesis must acknowledge that Esau is Jacob/Israel’s fraternal twin brother. There is no better symbol of rabbinic equivocation toward Rome.

The rabbis also had a “founding narrative” of their rise following the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome. In almost every version of the oft-told story about Yohanan and Vespasian, the rabbi had to sneak out of besieged Jerusalem in a casket. This story line speaks to my discussion about the creation or reinvention of Judaism. In the very legend in which Yohanan is promised Yavneh, the first home of rabbinic Judaism, Rabbi Yohanan symbolically dies—he is carried out in a coffin—and is resurrected standing before Rome, embodied by Vespasian Caesar.

As the rabbis of Yavneh and beyond focused their gaze upon the Torah and its interpretation, they showed themselves heavily indebted to the broader culture in which they read the Book. I demonstrated how the rabbis adopted the standard exercises of the Roman rhetorical schools. The rabbis also turned to a longstanding pagan literary genre, the symposium, as the skeleton for the Passover Seder. Even today, the Passover Seder is a lovely marriage of the biblical with the Greco-Roman aspects of Judaism, a banquet of East meets West.

The reach of Rome was long, and it embraced Jewish communities from one end of the empire to the other. Jews remained distinctive through their common customs, such as Sabbath observance or food laws. Even so, in their minority status they were not all that different

from other subgroups of the empire. Philosophers, for example, were distinctive by their garb and deportment, and often by their food habits, as well. Christians stood outside the empire for a long period of their development before becoming the empire itself. Geographical, racial, and ethnic subgroups made up the vast expanse of an empire that stretched from England in the west to Armenia and Media in the east. The one common denominator was the Greco-Roman Hellenism that became their patrimony. This was true for the Jews in the Roman Empire as well. Like every other subgroup, they, too, were Roman.

Even as one could distinguish between the rabbis and other Jews within the Jewish world—the rabbis themselves made this distinction—nevertheless they all shared a common Judaism that was heavily inflected by their common Hellenism. The details I have surveyed in this book have made it clear that by and large, the water they swam in was very good. And when they were asked “What the hell is water?” the answer, surely, was that among the many tributaries that made up the empire—from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean, from the Euphrates to the Caspian Sea—Judaism took its place within the Roman Empire as a Roman people and religion. Its transformation from the Jerusalem-centered Temple cult to a world religion was a reinvention, a resurrection if you will, accomplished through the vivifying waters of Greco-Roman culture.

What does this all mean for modern American Judaism? If the evidence has been weighed and I can conclude with reasonable assurance that Greco-Roman culture played a large hand in the invention of what we now call Judaism, does it make a difference? Should it matter to us?



I think it does, if for no other reason than to validate modern Judaism itself. Here, of course, bias looms large. If this book is but a defense of the lives we now live, if the Judaism I imagine in Late Antiquity is but a reflection back from the glasses I wear as a modern, if my gaze never truly penetrates through the lens to see the realities of Ancient Judaism, then I have failed in my task. It is for this reason that I have quoted so many texts and included illustrations not only from rabbinic literature but also from the other Jewish communities of the Roman Empire. I wanted to allow the testimony of antiquity its own voice to the extent possible. It is true that all of the evidence has been interpreted by me in support of the theory that Greco-Roman culture served as the midwife for the birth of Judaism as we know it. But still, the evidence is here to be read one way or another.

If the rabbis and other Jews took the best of their Roman culture and heartily imbibed Hellenistic civilization as they invented a Judaism to survive the destruction of the Jerusalem cult, then it can be an encouragement for us to do the same. Almost two centuries ago, the German-Jewish movement called *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, “the scientific study of Judaism,” appropriated Western methods and traditions. It created a Judaism that was consonant with the intellectual, university life of European culture. It allowed for the academic study of Judaism, German Jewish Reform, and other forms

of modern Judaism. Even after World War II and the horrors of the Holocaust, acculturation to the West remained the norm with the emergence of American Judaism. Jewish leadership in modernity both observed and celebrated the choices rabbinic Jews made long ago in the Roman Empire.

Much as they swam in the waters of Greco-Roman culture, so we flourish in American society, transforming Judaism as we go. Jews are in very large measure university-educated, schooled in the culture of the Western world. Jews have imbibed those values as, for example, we welcome forms of women's equality into our Jewish life. I, a rabbi, am comfortable living in the multifaith, pluralistic country that has given the Jewish community unprecedented opportunities. Jews today mediate among their heritage of European Jewry, the legacy of Talmudic, Greco-Roman Judaism, the history of biblical covenantal religion, and the ethos of liberal democracy. In this Jewish adaptation of the broader culture, the Jewish community stands as a direct inheritor of the Judaism of the Greco-Roman world. God willing, our legacy will be as rich and long-lasting as was theirs.

Earlier in this book I noted that when the Roman emperor arrived in a town, his *advent* was celebrated by citizens lining the streets to loudly greet him with shouts in Greek of *Ho Kalos*, "This one is The Good one!" This expression was accompanied by a gesture: pointing the index finger on the raised, outstretched right arm. This pointing was not considered impolite but, rather, the appropriate gesture acknowledging the emperor's, the Good One's, sovereignty.



FROM A COLOSSUS OF THE EMPEROR CONSTANTINE—CAPITOLINE MUSEUMS, ROME

The gesture was adopted by the rabbis as a way of acknowledging God's rule, and it still is reflected in synagogues today when Jews point to the Torah as they sing, *VeZot HaTorah*, "*This* is the Torah which Moses put before the people Israel." It is the demonstrative pronoun, the word "this," in Hebrew feminine *zot* (or, in the masculine, *zeh*), that provokes the pointing. How appropriate that the very gesture by which Jews still acknowledge God and Torah is itself a legacy of Roman culture!

The Babylonian Talmud tractate Taanit ends with a reference to this custom of pointing to God. I quote it here as a closing benediction:

In the Future, the Blessed Holy One will host a circle-dance for the righteous in the Garden of Eden. God will sit in the middle of them. Each and every one will point to God with their finger, as it is said (Isa. 25:9), "On that day they shall say: *This [zeh]* is our God; we looked to God and God delivered us. *This* is the Lord to Whom we look, let us

delight and rejoice in God's deliverance."

Timeline

356–323 BCE Alexander the Great; Greek conquest of the known world

384–322 BCE Aristotle is Alexander's tutor—beginnings of Hellenism

175–164 BCE Antiochus IV rules Judea; Maccabean revolt

146 BCE Rome conquers the Greeks

63 BCE Roman general Pompey conquers Jerusalem

1 CE Hillel and Shammai the Elders—forebears of rabbinic Judaism

30–33 CE Jesus's ministry and death

50–60 CE St. Paul active

66–70 CE Roman Palestine rebels; Jerusalem Temple destroyed, 70 CE

70–120 CE Beginnings of rabbinic activity in Roman Palestine

115–117 CE Jewish communities of the Roman Diaspora devastated by riots

132–135 CE Bar Kokhba Jewish rebellion against Roman emperor Hadrian

200 CE Compilation of the Mishnah

220–250 CE Rabbinic Tannaitic (early) works edited

224–651 CE Sasanian Empire in Iraq (Jewish Babylonia)

225 CE Beginnings of rabbinic Judaism in Babylonia

312 CE Roman emperor Constantine converts to Christianity

325 CE Christianity declared a licit religion in Roman Empire

330 CE Constantinople founded

361–363 CE Emperor Julian attempts to revive “paganism,” tries to
rebuild Jerusalem Temple

363 CE Julian killed in battle against Persia/Sasanians

375–425 CE Editing of Palestinian (“Jerusalem”) Talmud, rabbinic
Midrash on Genesis, Leviticus, Lamentations, Song of
Songs

410 CE City of Rome sacked by Visigoth king Alaric

450–550 CE Redaction and compilation of Babylonian Talmud

570–632 CE Mohammed flourishes

637–640 CE Fall of Sasanian Empire

637 CE Muslim conquest of Jerusalem

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KING AHASHVEROSH AND ESTHER IN DURA

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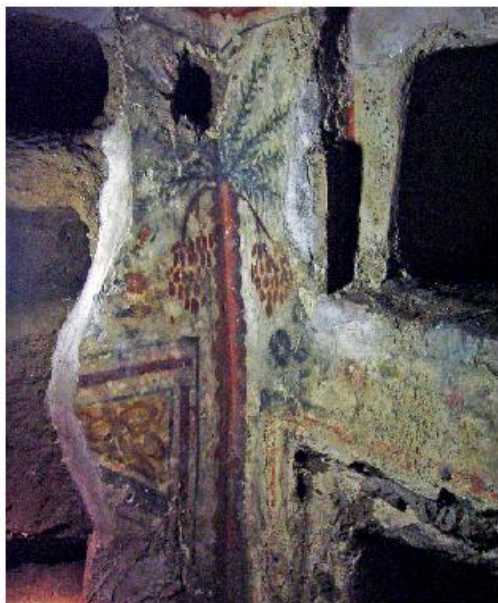
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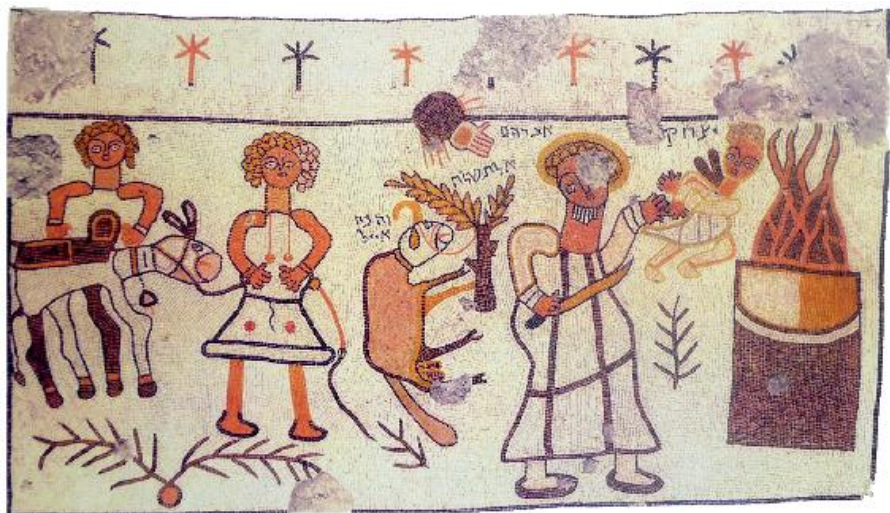
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MADABA MAP, JORDAN

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